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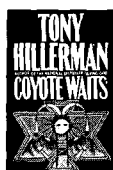
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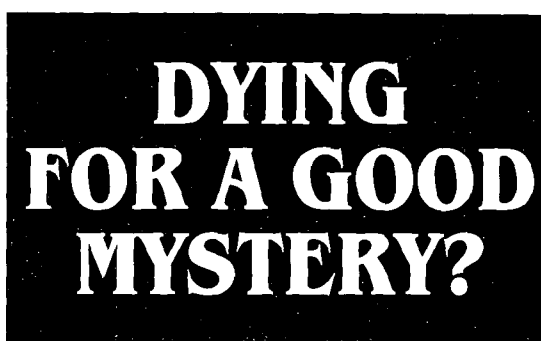
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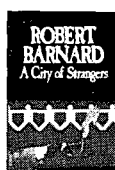
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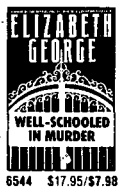
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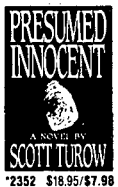
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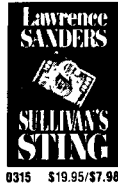
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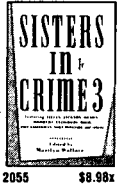
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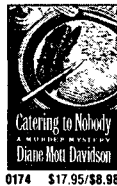
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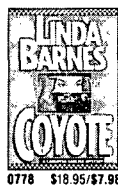
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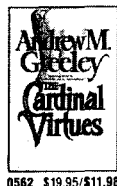
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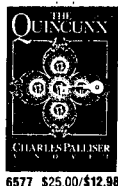
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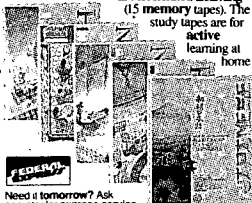
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GUEST EDITORIAL

by Mary Cannon

Crime fiction authors are getting nervous. Publishers are panicking, pushing their editors into a frenzy. Booksellers, finally overwhelmed, are beginning to whine. Conversely, book reviewers are growing ominously silent: could they be actually *buried* under the piles of new books that now seem to arrive hourly?

Welcome to the mystery genre in the nineties. Everyone is fretting over the boom in the crime fiction business. There are new publishing companies, and new imprints within old publishing companies. Old favorite authors are coming back into print, while literally dozens of newcomers are finding a home between covers. While this may pose problems for the aforementioned book professionals, where does that leave you and me, gentle reader? In seventh heaven!

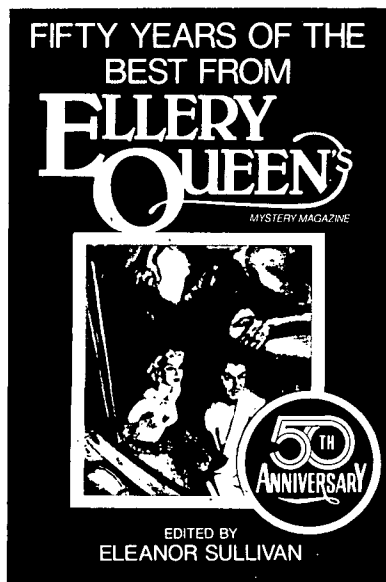
Partial to British village mysteries, you say? Dorothy Simpson and Margaret Yorke are now in paperback. So are Joyce Porter and Heron Cary as well as new authors like Caroline Graham, M.C. Beaton, and Susannah Stacey. Or-maybe

you love the senior sleuths? Joining Patricia Wentworth's Miss Silver mysteries are relatively new series by Sr. Carol Anne O'Marie, B.J. Oliphant, Simon Brett, James Yaffe, and Corinne Holt Sawyer. Like mysteries with cats? Why, there's—

Wait a minute . . . you're not beginning to whine, too, are you? Mystery readers are being offered a veritable smorgasbord of books, something for every palate. And at last publishers are acknowledging the importance of a book's nomination for a genre award; they're deigning to mention it on the cover. So here's a brief guide to some of the mystery awards. (Space doesn't permit me to give the lists of all nominees and winners, but at least this will give you some clue as to what the award implies.)

Membership in the Mystery Writers of America (MWA) is open to authors, professionals in the business (editors, reviewers), and fans, but only published authors are full-fledged members and from that group come the committees that award the prizes dubbed "Edgars" after Edgar Allan Poe. There

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are generally five nominees in each category, with winners announced at the annual MWA banquet in the spring. As is true of all the awards, the nomination for an Edgar for Best Novel, Best First Novel, Best Paperback Original, and so on is quite prestigious because the nominees have won the honor in a field of several hundred books published during the year. Past nominees for Edgars include many big names in the genre—Ross Thomas, Tony Hillerman, Ruth Rendell, Elmore Leonard, and Dick Francis—and talented newcomers such as James Lee Burke, David Stout, and R. D. Zimmerman. I'm personally partial to the categories of Best Paperback Original and Best First Novel, where Lilian Jackson Braun, Robert Campbell, and Keith Peterson have shared the honors with Kate Green, L. Enger, Frederick Huebner, Susan Wolfe, and Lia Matera.

The equivalent of an Edgar in England is the Crime Writers Association's "Gold Dagger," another name award turning up on paperback jackets these days.

The Crime Writers of Canada give Arthur Ellis Awards, named after a Canadian hangman.

While the Edgars are the most-recognized of the awards, there are others—several aimed at honoring specific types of

mysteries—that might prove even more helpful when you're selecting books. Fans of Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe books, for instance, should heed the awards given by the Wolfe Pack. These Wolfe aficionados hand out a "Nero" each year to a book they feel is most in the spirit of the great detective. Past winners include Charlotte MacLeod, Hugh Pentecost, Dick Lochte, Amanda Cross, and Robert Goldsborough for his continuation of the Nero Wolfe series.

Bouchercon is to mystery conventions what the Edgars are to awards—the granddaddy of them all. In 1986 the "Anthony" was born, named after long-time reviewer Anthony Boucher. The authors and fans attending Bouchercon each fall get a ballot, making these awards a veritable People's Choice. Past nominees include Robert Crais, Bill Crider, Gillian Roberts, and Sarah Caudwell as well as Sue Grafton, Thomas Harris, and Tony Hillerman.

Another fan award is the "Agatha," named after Dame Christie. Like the Anthony, the Agatha is voted on by the attendees at a fan convention. Malice Domestic, held for the third year in late April, 1991, is dedicated to the cosy murder, the amateur sleuth, the light-hearted approach, the humorous slant, the fair-play plot, the

very soft-boiled P.I. Nominees have included Carolyn G. Hart, Elizabeth Peters, Dorothy Cannell, Elizabeth George, Sharyn McCrumb, Mary Monica Pulver, and Robert Barnard.

The Private Eye Writers of America (PWA) have begun handing out their award, the "Shamus," at the Midwest Mystery and Suspense Convention held in Omaha over Memorial Day weekend. Voted on by members of PWA—exclusive to published authors of private eye novels and stories, naturally—nominees have included Karen Kijewski, John Lutz, Harold Adams, Benjamin J. Schutz, Wayne Warga, and Rob Kantner.

Mystery Readers International and *Mystery Scene* magazines both give awards, while *The Droid Review* names its top choices annually. These periodicals all have loyal subscribers among mystery readers, and in the first two instances it is the mystery readers themselves who are voting. *MRI's* award is called the "Macavity,"

and *Mystery Scene's* is the "American Mystery Award." Some authors recognized by the two magazines are Joan Hess, M.D. Lake, Nancy Pickard, and Marcia Muller. Another award, for Lambda Best Mystery, is given to recognize a novel with a gay protagonist. Both Mark Richard Zubro and Ellen Hart have recently been Lambda honorees.

So many mysteries. So little time. I hope that this walking tour of crime fiction awards has helped narrow your choices somewhat. Alas, many of the past-honored books are not in print. Not just yet. Of course, I see the UPS man staggering up my front walk even as we speak. Who knows what's come back in print, or how many of tomorrow's nominees are among the books in this latest stack?

NOTE: The August issue of AHMM, as usual, will provide a list of all the nominees and winners of this year's Edgars.—ED.

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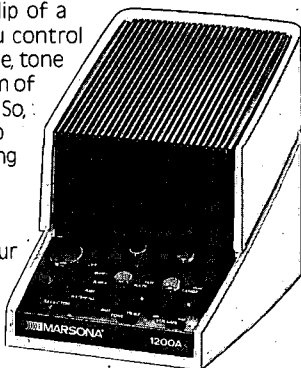
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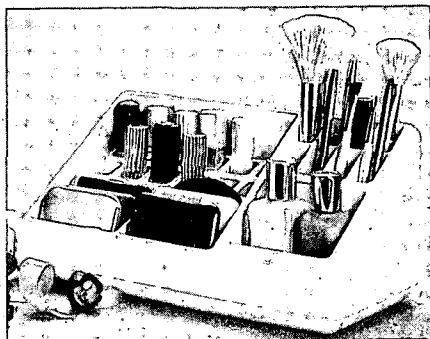
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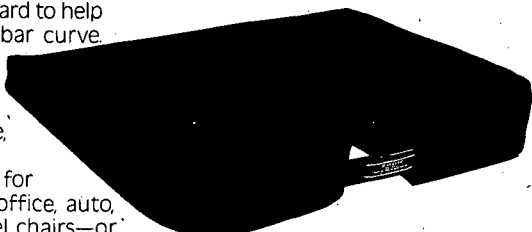
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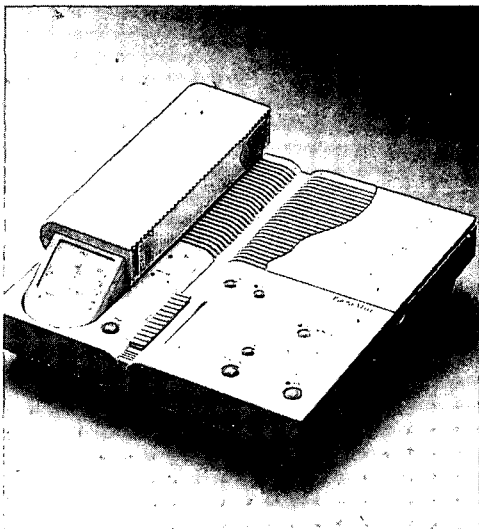
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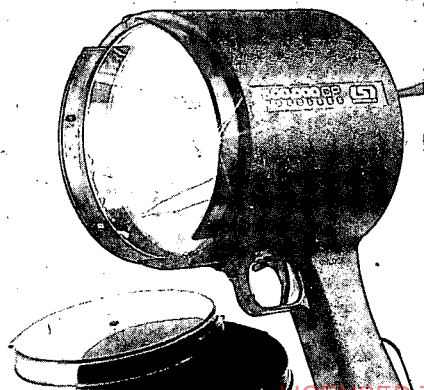
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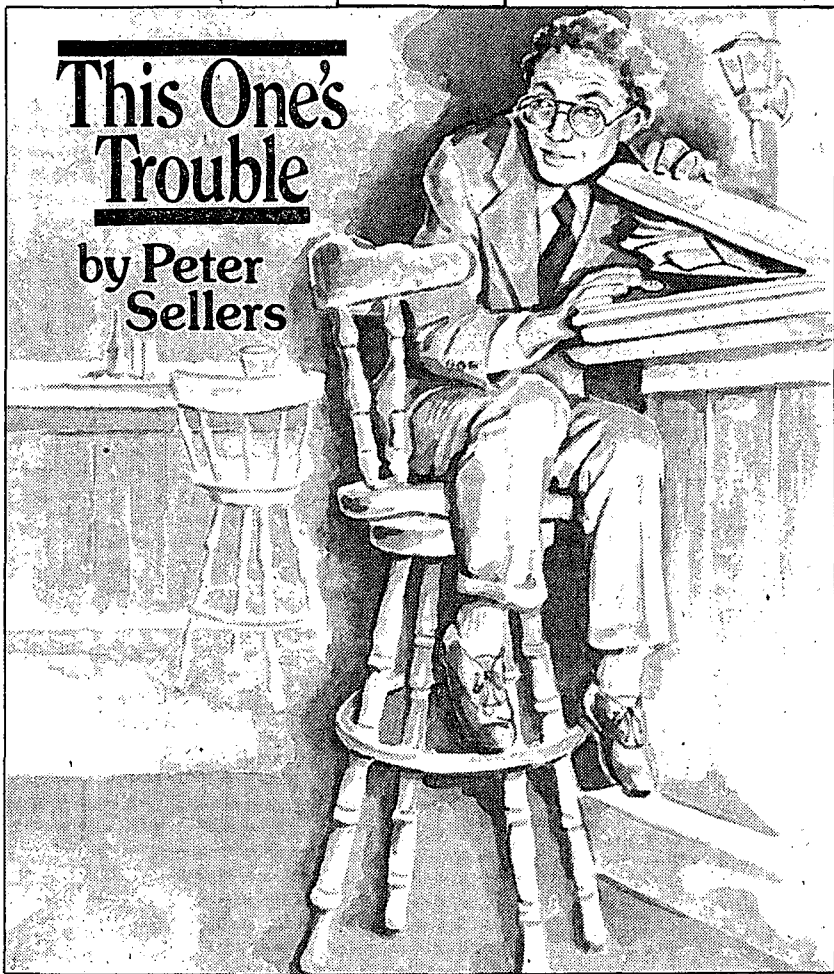
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This One's Trouble

by Peter Sellers



“I know what your trouble is,” the short man said. At first Bayly wasn’t sure if the guy was talking to him or not, so he just sat hunched over his beer, staring at the rows of bottles behind the bar.

The short man didn’t move. “I know what your trouble is,” he said again.

This time Bayly half turned his head, twisting it a fraction on his cartoon-character neck. The short man stood maybe ten feet

Illustration by Elaine Verstraete

away. He was thin and droop-shouldered, but his suit looked very expensive and his hair had that fake curled perm look that Bayly found so particularly stupid on men. Bayly looked him up and down, then turned back to the bottles behind the bar and continued trying to determine, based on how much they held, whether gin was more popular than vodka.

The short man changed his tactics. "Do you know what your trouble is?" he asked, using some kind of quasi-psychological approach.

Bayly snorted. Sure, he knew what his trouble was. His trouble was that it was the All-Star Break and he was sitting in a bar in Toronto instead of being at the stadium with the American League team, taking batting practice and gearing up for the game. It was due to start very soon, and Bayly wanted to be good and liquored up before the big TV set behind the bar was switched on.

His batting average was hovering dangerously close to the Mendoza Line. He was being platooned for the first time in his career. The hometown fans booed when he came to the plate. And his wife had left him two weeks before because she'd found out about Janine, and she was after him for a huge settlement. Yeah, Jack Bayly knew exactly what his trouble was.

"Do you mind if I sit down?" the short man asked.

Bayly hesitated, thinking he should just pound the guy and get it over with, but that would just increase his problems. He shrugged instead, and the short man sat down.

"My name is Henderson," he said, holding out a narrow hand which Bayly ignored. "Michael Henderson."

Bayly cast another sideways glance at the short man, who returned it with intensity. "I notice that your beer is almost finished. May I buy you another?"

Bayly nodded once.

The short man signaled the bartender. "Another draft beer for Mr. Bayly," he said, "and a Campari and soda for me, please, barman." The bartender set the drinks in front of them as Henderson perched on a barstool one away from Bayly. He raised his glass and smiled. The red liquid looked like soda pop to Bayly, and he felt a mixture of contempt and disgust for any man who would drink it. "Cheers, Mr. Bayly. Here's to your good health and continued success."

Bayly snorted. "Don't make jokes where the punchline could get you a shot in the head," he said.

Henderson shook his head vigorously. "I'd be the last one to make

jokes at your expense, Mr. Bayly. I'm absolutely sincere. I want to drink to your guaranteed success."

"I've hit three dingers since May, and right now I probably couldn't hit a beach ball with a tennis racquet. That ain't my idea of success."

"In baseball terms, no, I'd have to agree with you. But, Mr. Bayly, the tide is about to turn."

Something in the way he said it made Bayly turn his head. Henderson wore a serious, studious expression, his bright eyes blinking behind his glasses. "What the hell do you mean?"

Henderson reached down and lifted a thick black briefcase from the floor at the foot of his barstool. He laid it on top of the bar and rested his hand on it. "In here," he said in a conspiratorial whisper, "I have the root of your trouble. And in here," he tapped his forehead with a thin finger, "I have the solution." He unsnapped the briefcase and opened it to reveal a number of unmarked videotapes. "It's all on these tapes," he said.

Bayly felt momentary panic as he thought about numerous indiscretions with adoring female fans, but then he remembered that his wife was divorcing him anyway. "What have you got?" he asked cautiously.

"I have most of your season here, and some of last year's. In all, over three hundred twenty at bats. I've studied it for hundreds, if not thousands, of hours, and I think I know how we can fix things."

Bayly had heard that before. From the manager, the batting coach, his teammates, from a few hundred fans who'd written in suggesting he do everything from use a lighter bat to jump off the CN Tower. And he'd tried a lot of things, too. He'd opened his stance and choked up on the bat. He'd taken a shorter stride for a while and then he'd taken a longer one. He'd switched from one batting glove to two, then tried it barehanded. Nothing worked. If anything, the situation just got worse.

"What do you think it is?" Bayly asked, taking another sip of beer.

"It's your left wrist," Henderson said with satisfaction.

"Huh? You mean I'm cocking it too much? Johnny Venuti already told me that one."

"It's not what you're doing with the wrist at the plate. It's what you're not doing in general."

Bayly looked at the little man skeptically. "What the hell does that mean?"

"The bracelet."

At first, Bayly didn't get it. Then it slowly dawned. The bracelet was a huge gold chain he'd worn on his left wrist the first five and a half years of his marriage. His wife had given it to him on their wedding day, and he hadn't taken it off, except when he was in bed with other women during road trips, until he met Janine toward the end of the previous season and she told him what she thought of jewelry on men.

"I don't know whether it was the weight of that bracelet, the tiny difference it must have made to the timing of your swing, or whether it's just the psychological factor, the way you used to shake it up your wrist before every pitch. But the day you took that bracelet off, the wheels came off the wagon, so to speak." Henderson said it as if postulating a scientific theory.

Bayly wasn't much for physics, and he didn't believe that the weight of a hunk of gold jewelry could make that much difference. But he was superstitious. He never stepped on the foul line going on or off the field. He took everything out of the on-deck circle before stepping into it. And he always went onto the field before the second baseman and after the right fielder. He believed in what Henderson was saying, but he wasn't about to admit it.

"Where'd you get those tapes?" he asked.

"From the television," Henderson said.

"That's illegal, ain't it?"

"I won't tell if you won't."

They smiled at each other and then the bartender switched on the game. Bayly wasn't half as drunk as he'd hoped to be, but as he watched them introduce the starting lineups, he found he didn't care as much as he had a while earlier. He and Henderson sat there watching the game together, not speaking. The bar began to fill up, and it was the bottom of the third before Bayly turned to comment on a particularly adept play by the shortstop and realized that Henderson was gone.

A month later Bayly was on a tear. His average was up sixty points, and every time he stood at the plate, the left field fence seemed only about ten feet away. All the pitchers were grooving batting practice fastballs right in his wheelhouse. And the team was thriving on it, having soared up the standings so now they were just two games back. But sitting in a bar with four other guys, sucking the foam off an imported draft, Bayly was not a happy man.

He was worried about the next series. Four games at home

against the division leaders. Four games that could decide the outcome of the season. Bayly was thinking about those four games, paying little attention to his companions, grunting the occasional uninterested response, when he sensed someone standing next to him.

"I know what your trouble is," a voice said.

"Henderson," Bayly said, spinning in his chair and grinning ear to ear. He held up his left hand and shook it, setting the heavy gold bracelet flapping. "I took your advice."

"So I noticed," Henderson smiled. "But there's something else now, isn't there?"

The other players at the table had fallen silent and were looking at Henderson with the suspicion athletes usually reserve for outsiders.

"Let's sit over there," Bayly said, standing and picking up his beer. They moved to a booth across the bar.

"Get you a drink?" Bayly asked. "Campari and soda, right?"

Henderson nodded, and Bayly signaled the waiter. When the drink arrived, Henderson said again, "There's something else troubling you, isn't there?" When Bayly nodded, Henderson went on, "And I know what it is." He tapped the big briefcase he again had with him. "In here, I have the root of your problem." He tapped his forehead. "And in here, I have the solution."

"More tapes?"

Henderson nodded. "Of every game you've played in the last two years when Buck Snelgrove was an umpire. He really doesn't seem to get along with you very well, does he, Mr. Bayly?"

Bayly snorted a laugh. "If that ain't the understatement of the year. That son of a bitch hates my guts. He threw me out of three games last year. Two already this year. And at the plate . . ." Bayly just shook his head.

Henderson picked up the story. "His strike zone when you come to the plate is so big you could drive a truck through it and even the wheels wouldn't be called low."

"Damn right. So I go up there, I gotta swing at everything. I struck out three times the last time this guy called a game. And even if he's on the bases, I'm not safe. He'll find a way to get me. Had me picked off first last time when my hand was in under the tag. Every camera in the place caught it. But Snelgrove killed that rally for us, sure as hell."

"And he's behind the plate tomorrow night."

Bayly nodded sadly. "Yeah. His umpiring crew's working the

series, and that's four games of hell for me. A lot of the players are on edge."

Henderson gave Bayly one of his bright-eyed smiles. After a moment's silence, Bayly asked, "Why did you come to me about the bracelet?"

Henderson rubbed a thin hand over his smooth, pointed jaw. "It's very simple, really. I love baseball, have for years. And I admire you as a player. As a child I couldn't play, not well at all. And I'd sit and watch my brothers and the other children running and throwing and hitting and catching. There was something about the game that captivated me. I'd watch every game that came on television. My favorite player was Willie Mays then. I think one always needs a favorite player, like an icon. Over the years, I've had other favorites; they change as careers end and new eras begin. For the past four years, you've been my favorite. Watching you play baseball is almost a religious experience for me. The mighty rip as your bat slices the air is thrilling for me. It's more exciting for me to watch you swing and miss than it is to watch any other player hit a grand slam."

Bayly wasn't sure whether to be insulted or flattered, but he didn't say anything. He just kept his eyes on Henderson, whose face was now flushed and whose hands enacted every scene.

"The way you cover the field, the way you run the bases, the way your uniform gets dirty even on artificial turf. It's magnetic for me. And when I watched you suffering through that terrible slump, when I heard how the home fans, those fickle, awful people, turned on you, booed you, I knew I had to do something. I knew there was a solution." He paused and looked very proud. "And I was happy to have found it."

"I never did thank you for that, did I?"

"Oh, yes. Every time you swing the bat you do." He stood and picked up his briefcase. "I hope to see you again soon, Mr. Bayly."

"Call me Jack."

Henderson's gratitude was so childlike that Bayly felt embarrassed for him. "Thank you, Jack," he said and left the bar.

Everybody but Bayly was surprised when Buck Snelgrove didn't show up the next day. None of the other umpires knew where he was. He'd left his hotel to go to the stadium, and that was the last anyone had seen of him. The other three men in the crew worked the first game. The day after, a replacement was flown in, and he stayed for the rest of the series.

It wasn't until the fifth inning of the fourth game that Snelgrove was found wandering shoeless through a suburban industrial park. He was unwashed and unshaven, and he reported that he'd been forced into a car at gunpoint and blindfolded by somebody wearing a rubber Dracula mask and an old San Francisco Giants cap. He'd been taken somewhere, he'd no idea where exactly, and held there for three days. He'd been well fed, but the kidnapper had said nothing to him. A couple of handwritten notes, which the kidnapper immediately destroyed, said he was being held until Sunday afternoon and then he would be released unharmed. "The guy even put the ball games on the radio for me," Snelgrove said with amazement.

After the third inning of that day's game, Snelgrove was blindfolded again, taken to the industrial park, and let out, shoeless, warned not to take off the blindfold until he counted to one thousand.

Bayly's team swept the weekend series. The opponents filed a protest. And the Commissioner of Baseball launched an investigation. But in the end nothing could be proved.

After the Sunday game, Bayly came out of the players' entrance to a horde of autograph seekers. Among them, waiting patiently for his turn, was Henderson.

"Could I have your autograph, please, Mr. Bayly? It's for my son. He's your biggest fan. Could you make it 'To-Mikey'?"

Bayly went along with the charade, but as he wrote his name on the scrap of paper, Henderson whispered, "Great series, Jack."

Without looking up, Bayly said, "Kidnapping's against the law, ain't it?"

"I won't tell if you won't." Then, taking the autograph, he said, "Thanks, Mr. Bayly," and vanished into the sea of people.

"I know what your trouble is," Henderson said.

"How did you get my number?" Bayly asked. He was in a foul mood; the latest legal papers from his wife were spread all over the kitchen table of his lakeside condo. His wife's settlement demands had gone up to include a share of all Bayly's playing bonuses. And the only calls he was expecting were from his lawyer and from Janine, the woman he'd been seeing regularly for a year and the one his wife claimed was co-respondent in the divorce proceedings.

"It's easier than you think," Henderson answered.

Bayly took a deep breath. After all, Henderson had bailed him

out twice. And Bayly had a fat World Series ring on his finger that way back at the All-Star Break he'd never figured he'd see. He guessed he owed the guy a little civility. "So you know what my trouble is this time, do you?" Bayly asked.

"Yes, Jack. It's woman trouble, isn't it?"

Bayly laughed. "If I didn't know better, I'd figure you had my phone tapped and a spy satellite hanging around outside my bedroom window."

Henderson joined in with a soft chuckle. "Oh, it's not quite like that, Jack. But I have the root of your problem right here. And in here I have the solution." Bayly could imagine Henderson patting that fat black briefcase and then tapping a finger against his high temple.

"I sure appreciate everything you've done for me in the past, buddy. But I don't think you can help me now."

"You'd be surprised, Jack. After all, you're my favorite. And I hate to see you suffer."

"I appreciate your concern, but . . ."

"I'll be in touch soon, Jack."

Bayly listened to the phone go dead and then cradled the receiver. He felt uneasy but didn't know why. He spent another half hour going over the papers. Then he was going to meet his lawyer and go for a showdown with his wife and hers.

He dressed in a suit, something he hated but which lawyers always seemed to demand, and headed downstairs. Traffic was light and he was early, so he decided to make one quick stop. Just for a little boost of courage.

He pulled up in front of Janine's duplex and walked briskly to the door, letting himself in. She lived on a busy street that mixed residential houses with small shops and a cafe or two. From the window of the cafe across the street one had a good view of Janine's front door. Several patrons could see Jack Bayly go into the building and then re-emerge, his body contorted in grief, his cries of anguish audible even inside the restaurant.

"Jeez," one of the customers said, the cappuccino stopped halfway to his lips. "I wonder what his trouble is."

The small, curly-haired, bright-eyed man at the next table gave a puzzled frown. "I haven't the slightest idea," he said.

FICTION

Final Jeopardy

by B. K.
Stevens

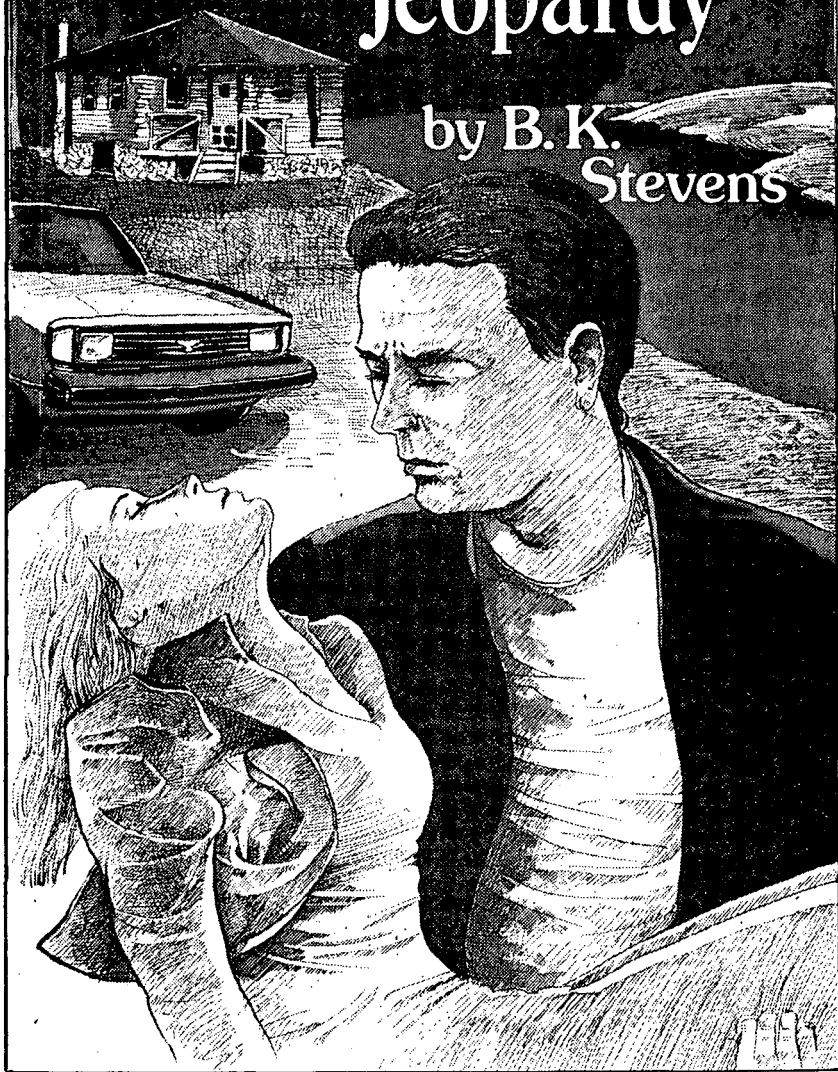


Illustration by Jim Ceribello

18

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On Monday, July 19, Jim Simpson did eight stupid things. Right in front of Harry Brock, the biggest gossip in the office, he got into a loud, bitter argument with Al Forbes. Next, at lunch, he told Mona Tarnak that the world would be a better place without slimeballs like Al. He then had half a tuna sandwich and three beers for dinner. Immediately after finishing the third beer, he decided to drive out to Al's lakeside cabin and settle this business tonight. When he found the door slightly ajar, he pushed it open and walked in. And when he saw Al Forbes sprawled on the living room floor, his eyes staring blankly at the ceiling, Jim sank to his knees on the blood-soaked carpet and picked up the gun lying next to the body. Suddenly realizing that he now had blood on his slacks and his fingerprints on the murder weapon, he panicked, pocketed the gun, and ran to his car. And he roared out of the driveway in such blind desperation that he didn't see the woman getting out of the car parked in front of the cabin, didn't pound down on his brakes in time to prevent the sickening thud that knocked her to the ground.

Then he did something really stupid. As he ran to the woman's side, he heard her moan, "What happened? Where

am I? Oh, God—*who* am I?" before her eyelids flickered shut, and after hesitating less than a minute, he grabbed her purse, picked her up, set her down gently in his back seat, and drove directly to his sister's house.

Even as he did it, he knew it was stupid. He ought to take her to a hospital. She didn't seem to have any broken bones, but she might have a concussion. Even if she didn't, what would happen when she woke up? Probably she had just been stunned for a moment on the road and would awake with detailed, damning memories of the man who ran her down as he fled from Al's cabin. She would call the cops, and he would be arrested for attempting to kidnap her, as well as for murdering Al Forbes. He might as well drive to the police station right now and get it over with.

But he couldn't do it. A ludicrous hope wouldn't let him. Amnesia, he thought. If she really has amnesia, I can buy some time.

As he neared his sister's house, he reached into the woman's purse and pulled out her wallet. Her driver's license gave him another jolt. So this was Lisa Cohen. For two weeks, Al had bored everyone in the office with his constant bragging about Lisa Cohen, the

brainy beauty he'd met on a recent trip to Boston. This broad, he had said, was not just another bimbo. She was up to her eyeballs in sex appeal and was knee-deep in talent and had brains coming out of her ears. She was a high school English teacher—okay, maybe that wasn't so exciting, but that was just the beginning. She could play tennis like Chris Evert and cook like Julia Child and play the piano like—well, like—well, she could play Mozart and Chopin and all that hard stuff. And she was gorgeous, and she was hot, and she absolutely couldn't keep her hands off the more sensitive regions of Al Forbes's body. Al had devoted entire afternoons to chasing his co-workers up and down the halls at the state Chamber of Commerce, pelting them with crude jokes about the insatiable desires and exotic demands of Lisa Cohen.

Jim had pictured her as a fading, bony shrew with a pinched face and an anxious libido, cultivating a slew of tiny talents in a desperate attempt to fill up an empty existence. So shriveled by a lifetime of pursuing dangling participles that even Al Forbes looked good to her. He had never imagined that she would be so young—just twenty-six, according to her driver's license,—or have such a trimly athletic figure, or

such delicate features, or such rich, soft blonde hair. What was a woman like that doing with an unscrupulous slob like Al Forbes? Well, it was one more proof of the injustice and irrationality of the universe.

She must be really serious about Al, Jim thought, since she'd driven all the way from Boston to be with him. If only she'd arrived at the cabin fifteen minutes earlier. Then she would have been the one to find the body. She would have called the police, Jim would have seen the squad cars in front of the cabin and driven on without stopping, and he wouldn't be in this mess. It wasn't exactly gallant, he knew, to wish such a grisly discovery on a woman, and it certainly wouldn't be fair to carry out the half-formed scheme he had in mind. But fear had pushed him well past gallantry and fairness tonight. Look out for number one, he told himself sternly. That's what Al had always done; that's how Al had gotten ahead. It was time for Jim to try the same philosophy.

He pulled into his sister's garage, praying that Lisa Cohen would stay unconscious for just ten more minutes until he had everything set. Cautiously, he picked her up in his arms, passed quickly through the silent house, and carried her up to the master bedroom. He set

her down on the bed and immediately removed her watch and the garnet ring on her right hand. It's like I'm robbing her, he thought guiltily, but that didn't stop him from making a hurried, nervous search of her pockets. He found nothing but a subway token and a coupon for Lipton tea. He took even these, determined to leave behind nothing that might trigger a memory.

Gently, he tucked an afghan around her, then lingered in the doorway before leaving the room. She looks like a nice person, he thought. I shouldn't be doing this to her. A glance at his bloodstained slacks aroused a fresh wave of panic. This was no time for scruples. He grabbed a pair of his brother-in-law's slacks from the closet and ran downstairs.

Ten minutes later, he stood in the doorway again, trying to work up the courage to wake her. His brother-in-law's slacks fit him reasonably well, his own slacks and a full gallon of bleach were sloshing about in the washing machine, and the gun—well, for the moment he'd done the best he could with that. Not knowing how durable fingerprints might be, he'd spent five frantic minutes scrubbing the gun with a vegetable brush, with an SOS pad, with anything in reach, then tossed it into a pot of boiling

water. That, he thought, ought to do it. And now he had to do the rest. Resolutely, he walked over to the bed.

"Miss," he said. "Miss? Are you all right? Maybe you should wake up now. I could drive you home."

She didn't stir, and a new fear stabbed at him. Oh, God, he thought. I should have called an ambulance. I've killed her by not getting her to a hospital. But then she groaned, opened her eyes, and stared straight at him. He waited anxiously for the word that would reveal his fate.

She frowned slightly. "What?"

He cleared his throat. "I said, would you like me to take you home now? Do you feel well enough?"

"Sure," she said faintly. "I'm fine. Thanks." She looked up at him, her eyes soft and hazy, and he could see the confusion slowly enveloping her. "I'm sorry. I seem to be sort of out of it. What happened?"

Maybe, he thought, and felt a spurt of hope. "I don't really know. I was driving down Military Road and saw you lying by the curb. I stopped to see what was wrong, and you seemed to be in rough shape. Then you passed out. I didn't know what to do, so I brought you here."

"Oh." She nodded wisely. "Well, that explains it." She

looked around the room, and her confusion seemed to deepen. "Where's here?"

Another promising question. "This is my sister's house. She and her husband are in Europe for a few weeks. Her house was closer than my apartment, so I figured it was the logical place to bring you."

"That makes sense," she said, and fixed her eyes on his face. They were incredible eyes, pale and blue and bottomless. "I'm sorry. This is so embarrassing, but I can't seem to remember your name."

"Jim Simpson." This is it, he told himself. Ask her. You'll go crazy if you don't find out. "And what's your name?" he asked casually.

Then the confusion in her eyes cleared, and he saw in her face a panic as deep as his own. Wildly, she looked around the room again, as if hoping to see the answer written on the walls. "Oh, God," she whispered. "I don't know. Is that possible? How can I not know my own name?"

He ought to have felt overcome with relief, but he didn't. She looked so scared. I'm a bastard, he thought. "You'll be all right," he said. "Maybe you hit your head, and you're sort of stunned. You don't remember anything about what happened tonight?"

"Not a blessed thing." She

shook her head and winced. "Ouch. My head hurts like anything. I guess I *did* hit it. Is my face bruised?" A sudden light came into her eyes. "A mirror. Do you have a mirror?"

This was a dangerous request, but he could scarcely turn it down. Silently, he brought her the mirror from his sister's vanity.

She studied her face for a moment, and then her shoulders sagged. "Nothing. I don't even recognize myself." She attempted a smile. "At least I'm not ugly. That's something." Another thought came to her, and she reached into her pockets, only to moan when she found them empty. "When you found me, did I have a purse with me? A wallet? Anything?"

He lifted his hands in pretended helplessness. "Nothing I saw."

"Did I say anything?"

"A little." He blushed and looked away. Until this moment, he hadn't realized precisely how cruel his plan was. "I offered to take you to a hospital, but you said, 'No. They'll call the cops, and I can't let the cops find me. I don't want to go to jail.' So I brought you here."

Her eyes widened. "God! I said that? Am I in trouble?"

He tried to shrug. "I guess so."

"I must be," she said numbly, "if I wouldn't go to the hospital

even though I'd been hurt. And I mentioned jail. I must have committed a crime."

"Maybe it just looks that way," he offered, desperate to comfort her. "Maybe you're afraid you'll be suspected, but really you're innocent."

She had seemed about to cry, but now she smiled, a sweet, grateful smile which, under the circumstances, scalded his soul.

"That's such a nice thing to say. And you're such a nice person, to bring me here even though you know I've got to be a criminal. Most people would be afraid they'd get in trouble if they helped me." She took a deep breath. "But it wouldn't be right to get you messed up in whatever I've done. I'll call the police right now and give myself up and say you weren't involved at all."

"No," he said, frantic. "It's crazy to call the police before you can remember what happened. Look, we've got plenty of room, and plenty of time before my sister gets back. Why don't you stay here and rest until your memory clears up? Then you can decide what to do."

She took his hand. "I can't believe how nice you are," she said.

They talked for half an hour. She was dismayed to learn that Military Road was in a bad part of town, but brightened after examining her arms for needle

marks and concluding, tentatively, that she didn't seem to be a drug addict. When her speculations about the probable squalor of her life and the crimes she might have committed became too depressing, he suggested food. The coffee and sandwiches helped. She took three aspirins, showered, and, after fervent protests about imposing too much, accepted his sister's bathrobe and pajamas: They were much too big for her, and she looked dwarfed and pathetic when she rejoined him in the kitchen.

"Well, I don't have any tattoos," she announced cheerfully. "Thank God! I was really worried about that. I think people like me tend to have tattoos. I have lots of bruises, though. Do you think I'm a gang member, and one of my cohorts doublecrossed me and beat me up and took all the loot and left me for dead? And stole my purse and my watch? Isn't it strange that I don't even have a watch? Everybody wears a watch."

"That's true," he said, glancing nervously at his own watch. He still had a lot to do tonight. "Look, you must be tired. You should go to bed. I have to do some things at my apartment, but I'll be back soon."

She stared at the floor. "Where should I sleep?"

"Just stay in the master bedroom. You'll be comfortable."

"All right," she said, and paused awkwardly. "When you come back, where will you sleep?"

It took him a moment to understand, and then his shame deepened. Of course. She thought he was being extraordinarily kind, and she wondered if there might be a price. "I'll sleep in the guest room," he said firmly.

"Thank you." Her relief was so palpable that it was almost tactless. "I mean, chances are I'm the sort of person who's quite casual about that, and of course you're very attractive, and I'm so indebted to you, and if you wanted to—but thank you. This feels better."

Indebted to him. He felt like scum. "Don't worry. I'm not expecting anything, or even thinking of anything. I just want you to feel better."

"I already do," she said happily. "I bet I'll have my memory back by morning."

Profound as his remorse was, he couldn't wish for that. If the police heard Lisa's testimony too soon, they would seize upon Jim as the obvious suspect and not look any further. And they had to look further, until they found the person who had really killed Al. Once the murderer was in jail and Jim was safe, he would confess the truth to Lisa, beg for forgiveness, make it up to her somehow.

That was the plan. It wasn't a brilliant plan, he knew—he was stalling, that was all, and chances were he couldn't stall long enough, chances were her memory would return before the police could solve the case—but it was the best he could do.

The next two hours were unrelieved tension. But by one thirty he was back at the house, sweaty, limp, amazed at how smoothly it had gone. He had driven downtown, taken buses, walked for miles, driven Lisa's car, walked again, taken more buses, driven home. Now it was done. The gun was at the bottom of a river at the edge of town. His bloodstained slacks were in a Salvation Army bin miles from the house. And Lisa's car was parked behind his brother-in-law's print shop where it could go unnoticed indefinitely. That was crucial. If the police found Lisa's car near Al's cabin, they would focus on finding her, neglecting all the other lines of inquiry that might eventually prove Jim's innocence. So he had forced himself to take a circuitous route back to the cabin, to shudder at the knowledge that he was once again within a few yards of the corpse, to wear himself out with walking and driving and worry. Now he was home, and it was over.

He crept upstairs and peeked

in at Lisa. Still asleep, thank God. And very lovely. Probably he shouldn't be noticing that. He tiptoed to the guest bedroom, opened the closet door in hopes of finding some spare pajamas, and saw two ancient tennis rackets on the shelf.

That was no good. Al had described Lisa as a champion tennis player. If she wandered into this room tomorrow and saw the rackets, something might click, and her memory might rush back too soon.

Tired as he was, he put the rackets in a plastic garbage bag and tried to remember the other things Al had said about her. An English teacher, a gourmet cook, a classical pianist. Doggedly, Jim went from room to room, filling his bag with volumes of Shakespeare and Dickens, with cookbooks, with his sister's few classical albums, even with dictionaries. He lugged it to the basement, heaved it into a storage closet, and padlocked the door. There. Now he was safe. He staggered back to the guest room, threw himself across the narrow bed, and fell instantly asleep.

In the morning, he awoke to the smell of coffee and the soft clatter of dishes. Lisa was standing by the kitchen sink, smiling at him shyly.

"I wanted to make you breakfast," she said. "I'm probably not a good cook—I don't think

criminals generally bother much with that sort of thing—but I figured I could risk coffee and toast."

She seemed surprised and disappointed to hear him talk of going to work. "What should I do while you're gone?" she asked. "I'd be glad to clean the house, but it's spotless already."

"Don't even think about cleaning. Just relax, try to get your strength back. Read *People*. Watch television."

Come to think of it, television might not be a good idea. There might be a report about Al's murder. "Or watch movies," he suggested. "On the VCR. My brother-in-law has tapes of some real classics."

He opened the cabinet under the television and was appalled by what he saw. *Spellbound*, *The Lady Vanishes*, *Marnie*—he didn't want Lisa watching those. The only recent movie was *Desperately Seeking Susan*, and that wouldn't do, either. Jim shuffled through the tapes until he found a sufficiently harmless one. "Here," he said. "My sister was a contestant on *Jeopardy* last month. She did really well—got to stay on three nights, won enough for this trip to Europe—and my brother-in-law made a tape of her appearances. Why don't you watch this?"

"If you want me to," she said reluctantly. "But I don't think I like game shows." She sighed. "Of course, I can't be sure."

"You'll like this one," he assured her. "See, you're given the answers, and you have to figure out what the questions are. You can play along, try to call out the questions, before the contestants do. It's fun."

She looked unconvinced but accepted the tape stoically. "All right. Thanks. It'll be interesting to see your sister anyway. She's my hostess, after all, and one ought to get to know one's hostess. May I have your number at work, in case I start feeling really bad?"

"Better not," he said hastily. "I can't take personal calls. I'll call you, though, every hour or so, just to make sure you're okay."

"Fine. Thank you, Jim. Thank you for every thing. You're the—well." She grimaced. "I was about to say you're the nicest person I've ever met, but that wouldn't be much of a compliment, would it? I can't remember ever meeting anyone else."

He smarted, knowing any compliment was more than he deserved. "Just take it easy," he said. "Don't go out, not at all. It's too risky. The police might be looking for you. Stay inside and relax. Watch the tape."

"I will," she said. "I promise I'll watch the tape."

From the moment he arrived at the Chamber of Commerce, it was obvious that Al's body had not been found. The office routine was churning on as always. Computer analyst Harry Brock, peevish and fretful even on his best days, seemed especially peevish and fretful this morning. He hovered by a secretary's desk, berating the unfortunate woman about her inability to make the computer produce the mailing labels she needed, insisting that her problems were attributable entirely to her own stupidity, that the computer itself was always perfectly simple to operate, perfectly reliable. Mona Tarnak, the office manager, sat behind the glass wall of her private office, her telephone receiver cradled between chin and shoulder, her attention fixed on the outer office as her eyes darted from desk to desk, watching for signs of secretaries slacking off.

Jim hurried to his own office and turned on his computer. When the police arrived—and he expected them any minute—he wanted to be already busy, completely and innocently absorbed in making his calls.

He needn't have worried. Long after he had typed first his initials and then his per-

sonal code into the computer, long after he had talked one CEO into considering Chamber membership and been turned down flat by three others, there was still no sign of the police. Probably the body still hadn't been found. That was bad. Clues might be evaporating, and Lisa's amnesia might lift at any time. The police had better get down to business, and perhaps he had better speed them along. Reluctantly, he smoothed his face into an approximation of a nonchalant expression, picked up his coffee mug, and strolled, as casually as he could, into the outer office.

Mona Tarnak was walking from desk to desk, hand-delivering memos to secretaries as an excuse for making sure all were working at a suitably frantic pace. When she noticed Jim lounging awkwardly by the coffee machine, she patted her relentlessly ungray hair into place and smiled.

"You're quite the recluse," she commented. "You've never gone half this long without a coffee break. Burying yourself in your office so you can be top salesman this month? Think you'll beat Al that way?"

"Not much chance of that," Jim said, deciding he'd better not even attempt a chuckle. "Say, where *is* Al, anyway? Did he call in sick?"

"No." Mona peered over a secretary's shoulder. "But yesterday he said something about not being sure he'd be in today. He hinted around about big plans." She looked up as Harry Brock passed by. "You heard him, Harry. What did Al say about having big plans for last night?"

Was it Jim's imagination, or did Harry turn paler at the words? It was hard to tell—he always looked pale, more or less. Pale, anxious, and annoyed with everyone. At sixty, Harry was the oldest non-executive at the Chamber, and his face had long ago frozen into a permanent pucker of disapproval that deepened whenever his younger co-workers spoke to him. Now the wrinkles around his mouth became furrows. "I don't know what you mean," he said.

"Of course you do. It was in my office, around four thirty, and Al said something about maybe not coming in today, about maybe being too tired. He was giggling so much I could hardly understand. And when you left, he followed you out, still jabbering. Just what did he say?"

"I don't remember." His glasses slid moistly down his nose, and he pushed them back into place. "That is, I wasn't really listening. I don't enjoy Al's vulgarity. Here." He handed

her a thin sheaf of paper. "That's the printout for the fall trade show. You want to look it over?"

"Later," she said, tossing it onto a desk. "Now, really, Harry. I *know* you were listening, because you were frowning, and—"

"I was not listening!" Harry insisted. "I was thinking only of my work. Work matters to me, even if it doesn't to anyone else around here." And he strutted off.

Mona put a hand on her hip. It was a spare, angular hip, sculpted by unflinching dieting and exercise and denial, deprived of the padding that her forty-plus years would have justified. "I like that! As if he doesn't waste more time gossiping than all the rest of us put together. Well, I'd better call Al and see if he'll be in at all today." She picked up the nearest receiver and dialed. Interesting, Jim thought. She didn't have to check the number. He hadn't realized Mona and Al were that close.

To hide his nervousness, Jim picked up the printout on the trade show and glanced through it while he waited for Mona to give up. He counted to ten. "No answer?" he asked casually.

"No answer," Mona said, and hung up. "So I guess he's out. You'd be just as glad if he never

showed up again, wouldn't you, Jim?"

The question stunned him. "What do you mean?" he stammered.

"Oh, don't play innocent. Harry told me about the big fight you and Al had yesterday. He snatched another sale from you, didn't he?"

"Oh, well." Jim tried to sound blasé. "I never would have made that sale anyway. I'd been working on Spencer Electronics for two years, and no dice. Al saw an opportunity, and he took it. That's all."

"Seize the day," Mona agreed, nodding. "Or *carpe diem*, as Al says."

"*Crappy diem*," Jim said. "That's the way he always pronounced it." And then he froze, realizing he'd slipped into the past tense.

Mona didn't seem to notice. She laughed and touched Jim's shoulder lightly. "So your Latin's better than his. I guess that's some consolation. His sales are always higher, but you're the one who went to college."

He didn't know how to reply, so took refuge in leafing through the printout. "Trade show's looking good," he remarked. "You've got a lot of companies signed up for booths already. Ruskin Office Supplies, Sinclair Chemicals—wait a minute. Spencer Elec-

tronics rented a booth?"

Mona winced, then shrugged. "Guess so."

"That's weird," Jim said, shaking his head. "Old Spencer's the most tightfisted guy I ever talked to. For two solid years, he insists he can't afford to join the Chamber—and now all of a sudden he not only comes up with the dues, he forks over money for a booth at the trade show. How much are those booths going for this year? Over a thousand dollars, right?"

She shrugged again. "Spencer could make ten times that much from the business he'll pick up at the show. He might be tightfisted, but he knows a good investment when he sees one."

"Chamber membership's a good investment, too," Jim argued. "Why couldn't Spencer see that?"

"I guess you couldn't make him see it," she said icily, "and I guess Al could. I guess he knows how to make a sale, and you don't. Excuse me." She plucked the printout from his hands and left.

The day crawled by. The police never came, and no one even alluded to Al's absence again. So at five o'clock Jim drove back to his sister's house, almost as full of dread as he had been when he had driven to work that morning. The first

two times he had called Lisa, she had sounded appropriately depressed; but she had seemed cheerful the third time, and downright bubbly the fourth. Bubbly, and mysterious. Something was going on.

When he opened the front door, a wave of aromas swept over him—cinnamon and taragon, garlic and lemon, butter and onions and cheese. Lisa bounded out of the kitchen, her cheeks rosy, her hair pulled back in a quick, artless knot. She planted a swift kiss on his cheek, flushed, and retreated.

"I think I know how to cook!" she said, elated. "I've been cooking and baking for hours. I couldn't find any cookbooks, so I've done everything by instinct, and, oh, Jim! *It felt* just right! Of course, maybe I don't really know what I'm doing. Maybe everything is disgusting and inedible. Come and eat it and find out."

She pulled him into the kitchen and set a bowl of cheese soup before him. "And here's homebaked bread to go with it," she said, "or cinnamon rolls, if you prefer. Then we've got chicken divan and wild rice and lemon pie. I know it was wrong of me to raid your sister's freezer and cupboards so freely, but I just couldn't stop myself. That's because I'm a criminal, I suppose—inadequate self-restraint, insuffi-

cient respect for other people's property. Well? How's the soup? How's the bread?"

They were perfect. Even though his anxiety severely limited his supply of saliva, Jim knew this was no ordinary food. "Very good," he admitted. "So the recipes just came to you?"

"Not right away." She took a judicious sip of soup. "After you left this morning, I sat in front of the mirror for two hours and stared at myself, trying to force a memory. I couldn't remember a thing—nothing I'd done, nowhere I'd been, nothing I'd ever known. I felt so empty. I certainly didn't feel like playing a game, but since I'd promised to watch the *Jeopardy* tape, I put it on. And in the first show, in the first round, one of the categories was International Cuisine. I saw the first answer—a French seafood chowder flavored with wine and saffron—and boom!"

"Boom?" he inquired, mystified.

"What is bouillabaise!" she said triumphantly. "The question came right into my head. The other questions in that category, too—What is Szechuan? What is curry? What are scampi? What is borscht?—I got every one, Jim, before any of the contestants did, so I figured I must know *something* about cooking, and I just had

to run into the kitchen and see what I could do. I *can* cook, can't I? This soup isn't half bad. Oh, Jim! It's so good to know I can do something besides rob banks and roll drunks."

He blushed guiltily. Into what sort of hell had he dropped her? "You're a wonderful cook," he said. "I'm glad the tape helped you realize it."

"Oh, that was just the beginning," she said, buttering a roll. "In the second show, there was a category called Shakespeare's Villains. Two of the answers stumped all the contestants, but I knew the questions—I knew *all* the questions. So I know something about literature, too. Then, in the third show, there was a Bible category. I got all three Old Testament questions right away, but not the New Testament questions. Do you think I might be Jewish?"

He choked on his soup. Lisa Cohen. Sure, she might be Jewish. Why had he urged her to watch that damn tape? It seemed to be making serious inroads on her amnesia. "You could be," he said.

"It's definitely possible." She paused in dismay. "Oh, dear. Maybe I should be keeping kosher. Then again, since I'm a criminal, how religious can I be? Are you ready for your main course? We have to be finished with dinner by seven

thirty. *Jeopardy's* on."

"But you've already watched that show three times today," he protested. "Aren't you getting sick of it?"

"Certainly not," she said indignantly. "How could I possibly get sick of it when it's teaching me so much about myself?"

So they watched *Jeopardy*. Whenever he could, Jim called out questions himself, hoping to preempt her memories. But he couldn't keep up with her. She soared through the North-eastern U.S.A. category and concluded that she might be from New England. She dominated Fitness and Exercise, and inferred that she might be athletic. He felt doomed.

When the final credits rolled, she looked at him shyly. "I think I did pretty well," she said. "Don't you?"

"Extremely well," he admitted.

"So do you think I'm well educated?" she pressed. "After all, Classical Mythology, The Age of Elizabeth—I don't think a high school dropout would do well on those, do you? All things considered, do you think I might be a white-collar criminal? Oh, I hope so! I hope I'm just dishonest, not violent. If I've actually hurt someone—God, Jim!" She shook her head hopelessly. "I don't think I could live with that."

He almost confessed then. But Lisa took a deep breath. "I mustn't dwell on that. It's too upsetting, and what's the point? Well, enough about me. I've been too wrapped up in my own troubles—I haven't even asked you what you do for a living. I'm sorry. What *do* you do?"

"I'm in sales," he said guardedly. Normally, he avoided the word sales when he described his job. He said he was a membership manager for the state Chamber of Commerce, and served as a liaison between businesses and the Chamber lobbyists. But he wasn't about to mention the Chamber now. Al had undoubtedly told Lisa stories about the Chamber, and it would be insane to push more memories to the surface. "It's pretty boring, really."

"Don't worry about that. Nothing about you could possibly bore me. I'm so grateful to you, Jim, and I like you so much. I really do."

She said the words simply, without any tinge of coyness or embarrassment. Maybe it was the amnesia that made her so open. Maybe, in addition to forgetting her name, she had forgotten all the games and dodges, all the traditional little evasions men and women use to keep each other at a distance. Whatever the reasons for her directness, it moved

him. And she was so lovely, and he admired her for being so brave and cheerful despite her fears, and she was so obviously attracted to him. He felt something stir inside.

He was appalled. He was lying to her, subjecting her to so much pain—it was shameful to have such feelings. It would be unforgivable to act on them. No, he decided, standing up. Maybe he couldn't help being selfish and cowardly, but he would not become completely despicable. "What a day!" he exclaimed. "I'm exhausted." And for the first time in some twenty years, he went to bed at eight o'clock.

On Wednesday, the wait was over. Jim arrived at the office to find all work suspended, the secretaries standing about whispering in tight, stunned clusters. Mona Tarnak sat at Harry Brock's desk, sniffing intermittently as she shuffled through his papers. When she saw Jim, she stuffed the papers into a drawer, slammed it shut, and gazed up mournfully.

"Oh, Jim!" she wailed. "Did you hear? Al's dead. The police say he was murdered. They want to question all of us—they're back in the board room now, with Harry. Poor, poor Al! Isn't it awful?"

He did his best to look shocked. "Horrible," he agreed. "Poor Al. Do the police know when it happened?"

She blew her nose daintily. "At least twenty-four hours ago, they said. A neighbor found him last night at his cabin. I asked the cops if burglars did it, and they said probably not. I bet they think it's one of us."

He mimed surprise. "One of us? That's crazy."

"Isn't it?" She tossed her tissue into the wastebasket and motioned him closer. "Now, don't worry. I won't say one word about Monday."

He knew exactly what she meant, of course, but opted for an ignorant, innocent echo. "Monday?"

"You know." She lowered her voice. "That big fight you and Al had, the one Harry told me about. And that crack you made at lunch, about the world being better off without slimeballs like Al."

Damn. So she *did* remember it. "That was just a figure of speech," Jim said, too quickly. "I didn't mean anything by it."

"Well, of course not. Good heavens! I know you'd never hurt Al. Until Monday, you never even had the guts to talk back to him. No offense, but you didn't." She sighed regretfully. "Not many people did. He was something special, wasn't

he, Jim? Not Mr. Rogers in every respect, maybe, but so much drive! So much energy! So much smarts! By the way, you wouldn't know his personal access code for the computer, would you?"

"No," Jim said, surprised at the request. "I think Harry's the only one who knows everybody's code. Why do you want it?"

"Oh, just to check on something. I'd ask Harry, but I hate to bother him today. When the police told us Al had been murdered, Harry turned so white I was afraid he'd have another heart attack. Odd, isn't it? He never seemed to like Al all that much."

Back in his office, Jim turned on his computer and stared blankly at the screen. Why did Mona want Al's personal access code? And why didn't she want to ask Harry for help? Harry, after all, had designed the office's program himself, and knew all of its secrets intimately. He had made the system flexible, so that every person in the office could create whatever files he or she needed; he had made the system simple, so that one need only type in one's initials in order to see a complete menu of one's titles; and he had made the system secure, by giving everyone in the office a personal access code. Only by typing in this code

could one get beyond the menu and see the actual files. And now Mona wanted Al's code—to check on something, she said. What could she need to check?

Blushing at his suspicions, and at the silliness of trying to play detective, Jim typed Al's initials into the computer. An intriguing menu of six-letter titles appeared. So these were Al's personal files. Some titles were easy enough to decipher. SIZLRS, for example—that must be where Al squirreled away information on hot leads. He always called them sizzlers. And CRAPPY—that must be the file on leads that didn't seem so hot. But TRCKRS, and OMNDST—what secrets might those titles be hiding? Jim brought his face close to the screen and squinted, as if physical proximity to the titles would somehow help him break through to the files.

"What are you doing?" a voice asked sharply.

Jim jerked his head back and saw Harry Brock standing in his doorway, looking more alarmed than indignant. "Those are Al's personal files," Harry sputtered. "You have no business snooping through them."

Jim blushed, embarrassed at being caught. "I can't snoop much—not without Al's code. Where's the harm in just looking at his titles?"

"It's ghoulish." Harry stepped into the office and decisively switched off the computer. "The man's dead. Let him rest in peace."

Jim looked at him curiously. "Why are you so upset about this? There's nothing—well, special about those files, is there?"

Harry took off his glasses and began polishing them furiously. "I'm sure I wouldn't know. I've never so much as glanced at any employee's confidential files." He cleared his throat. "The police want to talk to you next. I think it's only right to inform you that I felt morally obliged to tell them about that vicious fight you and Al had on Monday morning. I also felt obliged to say you were bitterly jealous of him."

"I wasn't jealous," Jim lied. "I envied his sales record, sure, but that's not the same thing. I admired him for—"

"You did not admire him. There's no need for pretense with me, Jim. I know Al took advantage of you. Believe me, I know. That's the sort of man he was, the sort who takes advantage of everyone."

An old rumor crept forward from its corner in Jim's memory. Something about Harry's daughter—five or six years ago, when she was still a teenager, before Jim came to the Chamber. She had met Al at an office

picnic. There had been other meetings, secret meetings. Something unpleasant had happened. There had been accusations in the office, denials, apologies, acceptances, enduring resentments. Had there been a motive? Jim wished he could remember the details. "Al took advantage of women, all right," he remarked.

Harry's shoulders straightened, stiffened, petrified. "I presume you're referring to Mona Tarnak. Well, you didn't hear that from me. I've never said one word about those two." He stuck his glasses back on his face defiantly. "I don't advise you to keep the police waiting any longer."

The police were not pleasant. "So, Mr. Simpson," the one called Lieutenant Fahey said, "we hear you and Mr. Forbes were rivals. We hear you got into a shouting match with him shortly before he was murdered."

"Oh, that." Yesterday he had spent hours practicing his shrugs, and now he produced a rather convincing one. "That was nothing. He made a sale in my territory. No big deal."

"It's a big company," Fahey pointed out. "I'll bet it's a big commission. And Forbes took the money right out of your pocket."

Jim emitted a laugh that, unfortunately, wasn't nearly as

convincing as his shrug. "That money was never in my pocket, and probably never would have been. I'd been trying for years to get Spencer Electronics to join the Chamber, but I couldn't even get them to nibble."

"So how did Al Forbes get them to nibble?" the other detective cut in.

Jim lifted his hands in a becomingly modest gesture. "He was just a better salesman, I guess. His sales were always better than mine."

Fahey chuckled. "Yeah, that's what we heard. That's not all we heard, either. For example, we heard this wasn't exactly the first time Forbes made a sale in your territory. It happened all the time, right? And when you tried complaining to your supervisor, you nearly got fired. The brass wasn't about to rattle the top salesman—not for the sake of a marginal producer like you. So there was no way to stop this guy, no way to protect your territory. How did that make you feel?"

"A little frustrated," Jim admitted. Absolutely furious, he thought. As long as Al brought in the sales, and as long as he contented himself with ripping off other employees and didn't try ripping off the Chamber itself, nobody much cared what he did. Jim scraped up a benign

smile. "Actually, I think sometimes Al just got confused about which companies were in which territory. Our territory system is rather complicated."

"There was no confusion this time, was there?" Fahey demanded. "We hear you went to Al Forbes for advice about how to get Spencer Electronics on board. He told you to give it up as a lost cause, and then he turned around and made the sale himself. Is that true?"

"It's true." Damn Harry Brock, Jim thought angrily. He must have been the one to tell the police about that—he had been in the room when Jim had asked Al for advice. "You see, Al had a very assertive sales approach. He believed in seizing opportunities—in seizing the day, if you will."

"Yeah, *carpe diem*." Fahey flipped through his notes. "We hear that was his slogan, and you always made fun of him for mispronouncing it."

"All right," Jim said, exasperated. "So I disliked the man. That doesn't mean I hated him enough to take out a gun and shoot him."

Fahey looked up sharply. "What makes you think he was shot?"

Oh, God, Jim thought. All my lies, all my shrug-practicing sessions, and now I botch it through a stupid mistake. "I just assumed," he stammered.

"I mean, someone gets murdered, you assume he was shot."

"That's some assumption. That's like saying if someone gets murdered, you assume the butler did it." Fahey put down his notes. "Well, as it happens, Al Forbes didn't have a butler. And he didn't get shot."

This time there was no need to fake surprise. "What?" Jim croaked.

"Oh, come on, Mr. Simpson. Don't get cute. You slipped in that little bit about the gun to throw me off, didn't you? You're so damn innocent, you don't even know how he was killed. Is that what I'm supposed to think?"

"No. I thought—that is, I *don't* know how he was killed."

It was Jim's first genuine moment of the day, but Fahey snorted in contempt, as if he had never before seen such pathetically transparent acting. "You don't know. How about a blow to the back of the head? A blunt object? How does that sound?"

The scene in the cabin came back. There had been a lot of blood—possibly too much for a gunshot wound, come to think of it. But what about the gun by his side? Jim held his head in his hands. "I don't understand," he said.

"Oh, I think you do. It's interesting you should mention a

gun, though. We found papers for a .22 Beretta in Forbes's cabin, but we didn't find the gun. Where do you think we should look, Mr. Simpson?"

At the bottom of the river, he thought glumly. All that work, wasted on disposing of a gun that apparently hadn't killed anybody. "I don't know."

"That's an unexpected response. Now, let's see if I can guess your alibi. You went straight home after work, didn't see anybody, didn't call anybody, went to bed early. You sure didn't go anywhere near Forbes's cabin—no, sir, not you. You can't prove any of that, but naturally you're telling the truth—you'd never lie to the police. Am I right?"

"Close enough." He hadn't realized how hollow and predictable it would sound.

"Well, don't feel bad. Nobody else around here has a decent alibi, either. Motive, though—you're way ahead of the pack on motive. That's all for now, Mr. Simpson. We'll chat again. Maybe you'd like to take a turn, guess the next thing I'm going to say?"

It wasn't hard. "Don't leave town," Jim said flatly.

"Bull's-eye." Fahey grinned.

At five o'clock, Jim longed for the familiar solitude of his apartment. It had been an

endless, unendurable day—supportive murmurs and uneasy glances from his co-workers, silence whenever he encountered Harry Brock, a second unnerving session with the police. He felt frazzled and unsociable, unfit for anything but sitting alone in the dark and brooding about how unfairly life was treating him. Instead, he had to face Lisa.

Once again, when he opened his sister's front door, the air was warm with spices. This time, however, the stereo was blaring so loudly that Lisa didn't hear him come in, didn't realize he was home until he walked into the kitchen and tapped her on the shoulder.

"Oh, hi!" she said, her smile wide and immediate. "Dinner's almost ready. How was your day? You look so tired and upset—is something wrong?"

He couldn't help smiling back, touched by the domesticity of the moment. He felt a sudden, absurd impulse to tell her all his troubles. But that was impossible. "Not at all," he said heartily. "Just a busy day. Sales, sales, and more sales. So, what's for dinner?"

"Nothing fancy tonight—just halibut steaks, with baked beans and brown bread, and bread pudding for dessert. Does that sound all right?"

"Great." He sniffed in exaggerated appreciation. "You

spent the day cooking again, then?"

"Not the whole day. I decided to do some laundry, and guess what I spotted on a shelf in the laundry room? The home version of *Jeopardy!* I couldn't really play, not all by myself, but I went through seventeen games, writing down all my questions and then checking them against the little booklet. It was so exciting! I learned so much about myself!"

He had just been starting to relax. Now that process reversed itself sharply. The dinner that had sounded so homey suddenly seemed ominously Bostonian. The rock music blasting through the house was disturbing, too. She was a classical pianist, wasn't she? He'd hidden all the classical albums; that should have cut off any musical associations. So why was she tapping her foot to Billy Joel? "What did you learn?" he asked.

"For one thing, that I must be from New England, probably from Massachusetts. There was a Revolutionary War category, and the questions absolutely ripped out of me—What is Bunker Hill? Who was Paul Revere? It was as if they were part of my soul. Then there were three classical music categories, and I zoomed right through them—What is the 'Ode to Joy'? Who was Bach?"

What is an aria? I *knew* music had to be part of my life, so I ran to the stereo. I couldn't find any classical music, but I found plenty of Billy Joel and Elton John, and I suddenly thought, there—*these* are the ones I have to hear. Now, why do you suppose I had such a strong reaction to those two?"

"I have no idea," he said, but of course he knew. Billy Joel and Elton John. The piano was the link. Why hadn't he hidden the piano men?

"It's puzzling, isn't it?" she said, opening the oven to peer critically at the bread. "Anyway, I also did well on all the literary categories, and on categories involving anagrams, rhymes, any sort of word game. Then there was a TV Teachers category, and I felt the oddest twinges when I saw those answers. Do you think I could be an English teacher?"

"There's no reason to assume that," he said anxiously. "I think you're just very smart. You seem to know a lot about everything."

"You're so sweet," she said, beaming, "but you're wrong. I did horribly on Astronomy, for example, and on The Southwest. And Pregnancy and Childbirth—I scored a zero there. I don't think I've ever had a child." She paused for a moment. "Do you think I'm married, Jim?"

He looked away. "There's no way to tell."

She poked the halibut steaks on the counter. "Almost thawed. Of course, I'm not wearing a wedding ring, but the person who stole my purse and my watch could have stolen that, too. Still, marriage and childbirth—I don't see how I could forget those, no matter how hard I was hit on the head. Anyway, I *hope* I'm not married—not yet. Are *you* married, Jim?"

"No," he said, swallowing hard.

"I didn't think so." She seemed immensely pleased. "Goodness—that music's rather loud, isn't it? Should I turn it down? Or would you prefer to listen to someone else? I saw some Ray Charles—"

"No!" he cried. Another pianist was the last thing he needed. "I mean, Billy Joel's fine. I'm a big fan of his."

"You are?" Her face was resplendent with happiness. "I think I am, too—all signs point in that direction. So maybe we have something in common. Maybe we have a lot in common, Jim. Maybe we're really compatible. And maybe we'll find out for sure tonight, when we watch *Jeopardy* together."

It was a half hour of hell. In the Jeopardy round, every category was dangerous in one way or another. Women in Sports,

Colonial America, Jazz, Greats—Jim squirmed as she called out question after question. The commercial break was worse. An impeccably concerned local anchorwoman appeared, chanting headlines of stories to be covered at eleven. "Police are investigating the brutal slaying of a businessman at Emerald Lake," she said, and a ripple of anxiety passed over Lisa's face.

"You found me on Military Road," she said. "Is that anywhere near Emerald Lake?"

"Other side of town," he assured her.

She sighed. "Thank God. So whatever I did, at least it had nothing to do with that poor man's death."

Most of the Double Jeopardy categories were blissfully neutral. But even in Business and Industry, one question brushed against forbidden memories. "Multimillioned Malcolm published magazine by his name," the answer read, and Lisa drew her breath in sharply.

"Who was Forbes?" she whispered, and squeezed her eyes shut.

A still more frightening moment came at the very end of the round. Jim winced at the last answer in American Literature: "Thoreau penned a classic while living on its shores."

"What is Walden Lake?" Lisa said, then corrected herself.

"No—not Walden Lake. Walden Pond." A deep trouble came into her eyes. "Why do I have such a strong image of a cabin by a lake?"

"Lake, pond—what's the difference?" Jim said, frantic to keep her from fixating on cabins and lakes. "Look—here's the Final Jeopardy category. Foreign Phrases. How much would you wager on that?"

"I don't know." She was staring at the carpet, obviously still straining for a memory.

"Well, I'd wager a lot," Jim chattered wildly. "I know lots of foreign phrases. *Je ne sais quoi, la dolce vita*—think it's one of those?"

He kept it up throughout the commercials: Maybe if he could guess the Final Jeopardy question, if he could just once call it out before she did, the novelty would startle her out of her reverie.

The answer materialized on the screen: "A 'Latin' lover might say this to a reluctant lady."

Jim knew that one, all right. "*Crappy diem!*" he shouted, jumping up from his chair; and then he froze, seeing how Lisa's eyes had widened, how she swayed in her chair as the recognition washed over her.

"Put it in the form of a question," she said mechanically. "That's so important, especially in Final Jeopardy. What is

crappy diem? No—it's *carpe diem*. But he pronounced it the other way. *Crappy diem*."

"Show's over!" Jim said brightly. "How about coffee? I can—"

"No!" she said harshly. "I have to remember this. It's coming back now." She covered her face with her hands. "Forbes—I *knew* there was something about that name. But not Malcolm Forbes. Al Forbes. I knew him. I came here to spend a week at his cabin, his cabin on Emerald Lake. That's why I got confused about Walden. I had an image of Al's cabin, not Thoreau's. And that news report about the businessman being murdered—oh, my God! That was Al. He's dead."

He ached with something—with pity or fear or guilt, he didn't know which. "I'm sorry. That's a horrible way to lose someone you love."

She shook her head slightly. "I didn't love him. I hardly knew him. We went out once, on a blind date, when he was visiting some friends of mine in Boston several weeks ago. I couldn't stand—well, we didn't hit it off, so when he asked me out again, I said no. He kept calling me, though, every few days, even after he left Boston and came back here."

Ever the persistent salesman, Jim thought. And the suc-

cessful one. "So finally you agreed to come to his cabin for a week."

"Only because he said he wouldn't be there. He said he was going on vacation, and I could help him out by house-sitting. He told me how beautiful the lake was, and said he had a grand piano. I was itching for a change of scene, I couldn't afford a real vacation, and it sounded so lovely. And then—oh, Jim! It's turned into such a nightmare."

She broke down then, pressing her face against the back of the chair, weeping softly, too overcome even to cover her eyes. He knelt on the floor next to her and took her hands.

"It's all right, Lisa," he said. "You'll—"

Abruptly, she stopped crying. "How do you know my name?"

He nearly tumbled over backwards. "You mentioned it," he faltered.

"No, I didn't. I didn't even remember it until a few moments ago." She drew her hands away and stared at him. "Wait a minute—*your* name. I've heard it before. He mentioned it. There's a Jim Simpson who works at the Chamber of Commerce. That isn't you, is it?"

He tried to ignore the question. "You're too worked up. Do you want a drink, or some aspirin, or—"

"I want an answer. Another

thing. What's this about finding me on Military Road? I wasn't anywhere near Military Road. I was at Al's cabin." She knitted her brow. "The last things I remember are driving up to the cabin and getting out of my car. Then something hit me. Something—"

"All right," he cried, anguished. It was over. "I lied about Military Road. I lied about everything. I was at the cabin, Lisa. I saw Al's body. And I panicked, and I was so desperate to get away that I drove too fast, and I didn't see you, and I hit you with my car. And when I realized you had amnesia, I brought you here and made up all those lies. I'm sorry. It's the lowest, cruelest, stupidest thing I've ever done in my life."

She looked at him incredulously. "Why did you do it?"

"Because I wanted to keep you from going to the police." He walked to the other side of the room, overcome by fear and shame. "Because you saw me leaving the cabin. I knew what you'd think. I knew you'd tell the police that I killed Al."

"Well, good heavens!" She stood up, putting her hands on her hips. "If that isn't just ridiculous! Why on earth would I tell the police a silly thing like that when I know perfectly well that I killed Al myself?"

* * *

At first, Lisa had a difficult time with the police. Lieutenant Fahy, deeply skeptical about the amnesia part of her story, snickered openly at the self-defense part, too. But after Jim had mumbled out his own pitiful little confession, after he had dragged Harry Brock to the police station and forced him to tell what he knew, Fahy began to soften. Lisa's candor and distress, Jim's self-loathing, Harry's quivering hysteria—all were too obviously genuine to be disbelieved for long.

It had started with Harry. For a long time, he had nursed suspicions about Al's more spectacular sales, wondering if he had sometimes used less than kosher bait to lure companies into the Chamber. Monday's argument about Spencer Electronics renewed those suspicions. Later, outside Mona Tarnak's office, Al boasted about the clever trick he was playing on Lisa Cohen, and made a monumentally tackless reference to his affair with Harry's daughter. That did it. Harry decided to stay late at the office and do some unauthorized browsing through Al's computer files.

SIZLRS, TRCKRS, OMN-DST—those titles had led to records of only marginal sleaziness. CRAPPY proved more in-

teresting. It was not, as Jim had assumed, a file of unpromising leads. Rather, this was Al's *crappy diem* file, his notes on opportunities seized, of companies bribed or bullied into joining the Chamber. Some, such as Spencer Electronics, had been given unauthorized perks—free booths at trade shows, contracts to provide the Chamber with expensive, unnecessary supplies and services. Mona Tarnak's complicity in securing these bonuses was duly noted in the files. Sometimes Al had tempted a company aboard with unkeepable promises of confidential information about competitors or special favors from Chamber lobbyists. Some lonely CEO's had spent very special evenings with Mona Tarnak, then paid their membership dues promptly when Al dropped hints about calling their wives; several female CEO's had been pressured into joining after special evenings with Al himself. In all, Al's seized opportunities had siphoned many thousands of dollars away from the Chamber over the years, and could cripple its reputation if they became known.

Suitably aghast, and secretly delighted, Harry decided to go to Al's cabin that very night and demand his immediate resignation, threatening to reveal all to the Chamber's president

in the morning if Al didn't comply. If by showing up at the cabin Harry also ruined Al's plans for a romantic evening, and saved another young woman from his clutches, so much the better.

Meanwhile, Lisa Cohen had arrived at the cabin, to find that Al had no grand piano—it was in the shop, he said—and no intention of leaving—there'd been a mixup with his Club Med reservations, he said. Anyway, he hinted, wouldn't it be cosier to spend the week together? They could listen to music together and take long walks together and skinny dip together. This proposal Lisa had indignantly rejected. Al had wheedled, then grown angry, then grown ugly. Lisa lost her temper. The room bristled with accusations about deceit, about snobbery, about shabbiness, about frigidity.

Into this pleasant atmosphere strode Harry Brock, with a fistful of printouts detailing Al's misdeeds. He presented his evidence and waited smugly for Al's contrite response. Al punched him in the chest. Poor Harry stumbled backwards, bounced against a wall, and came down sadly on his rear. Lisa shrieked. Hardly pausing to curse at her, Al seized Harry by the lapels and began shaking him vigorously. Lisa grabbed Al by the arm,

begging him to stop. He knocked her to the floor. Harry was now alarmingly pale. He cried, "My heart!" and looked ready to expire.

Distraught, Lisa raced for the telephone. But Al saw her, threw Harry down, grabbed the receiver from her hand, and struck her in the face. He would deal with her in a minute, he vowed, and teach her not to be such an uppity bitch. But first he'd take care of this little creep. He took a revolver from his desk drawer and turned to face Harry.

Harry was cowering in a corner, clutching at his chest, his eyes rolling wildly. Al looked over him, screaming insults, totally out of control. Lisa looked desperately about the room and saw a stack of logs next to the fireplace. She never meant to kill him, she said later. She wanted only to stop him. But the top log happened to be a very big log, and she hit him with all the power and precision that had won her trophies in every amateur tennis tournament in the state of Massachusetts. He crumpled promptly.

Harry regained composure before she did. While she was still frozen, her eyes glazed with horror, he led her to the door. They had to get out, he said. The police wouldn't understand. Let them think bur-

glars did it, or that young idiot, Jim Simpson. If Lisa went quietly home to Boston, and Harry simply kept his mouth shut, no one would think of connecting them with this death.

She agreed numbly, hardly knowing what she was saying or doing. Already her mind was clouding, blurring, erasing. As the police psychologist explained later, she could not accept the fact that she had killed someone, so she was taking refuge in oblivion. It took her some time to achieve it, however. She drove about aimlessly for over an hour, trying to figure out where she wanted to go. All she had was an image of a cabin. Finally, she summoned up the resolution to return, no longer having any idea of what she would find inside. And in keeping with Jim's usual bad luck, she got out of her car just as he was speeding away. She hit her head on the pavement, and disorientation escalated into full-fledged amnesia.

It took the police some time to piece all this together, still longer to believe it. Perhaps simply as an excuse for not arresting Lisa, Lieutenant Fahey insisted that he suspected Harry, or Jim, or both, of striking the fatal blow. In the meantime, Lisa continued to stay at Jim's sister's house—she couldn't leave town, and she had nowhere else to go—and he

moved back to his own apartment, after shamefacedly returning her purse and her watch, her car and her ring and her Lipton coupon.

He waited for her to start hating him, but it never happened. She was too exhausted to hate anyone, she told him once, too full of sorrow at the thought that she'd ended a man's life. Besides, they'd spent so many hours together in dingy waiting rooms at the police station, whispering about their chances while Harry took his turns at being interrogated, that the bond between them was mysteriously cemented. Resentment began to seem beside the point.

It was a tense time. There was a chance that Lisa would have to stand trial, and ominous talk about charging Jim and Harry with obstructing this or concealing that. Attorneys consulted with them, nodded, and withdrew to negotiate with prosecutors. Finally there was a hearing, brief and undramatic and inscrutable, since all the important questions were settled during lawyerly mumblings at the bench. And then—impossibly—it was over.

"So that's it?" Jim said, still incredulous. He and Lisa had gone to a restaurant near the courthouse and were weighing the propriety of a victory drink. "Nobody goes to jail?"

"I guess not. I guess they decided none of us is sufficiently criminal to be worth the bother of a trial." She looked at him severely. "You're getting off much more easily than you deserve."

"I know," he said miserably. "I feel as though I ought to be paying off a debt to society—or to you. I half wish you were suing me."

"It's a thought. I could sue you for pain and suffering, I suppose—but you may actually have eased that. If you hadn't terrified me with the idea that I was a career criminal, I might still be sunk in misery about killing Al. You shocked me out of that. Maybe I should be grateful."

"Don't you dare be grateful to me. I don't deserve it."

"True," she admitted cheerfully. "You *were* selfish and cowardly. But you've paid for it. If you'd driven me straight to a hospital, you'd have spared yourself a lot of anguish, and you'd never have been under suspicion at all. Besides, you could have been *more* selfish and cowardly. You could have just left me lying in the street. Or you could have backed up, run over me, and made sure I'd never testify against you."

"Good God!" he cried. "Don't say that. It never occurred to me."

"I know. It would have oc-

curred to a lot of people, though. So maybe you're not the salt of the earth, but you're not the scum of the earth, either. One could do worse." She picked up a menu and scrutinized it. "Are you definitely leaving the Chamber?"

"I'll give notice tomorrow. It's too sad there now, with Al dead and Mona fired and Harry moping. Besides, I'm no good at that job, and I don't enjoy it. What I'd really like to do is forget all this and start fresh—go somewhere new, do something else."

He paused reflectively. "I used to work in college admissions. The money was lousy, but it was interesting, and at least I felt like I was selling something worthwhile."

She kept her eyes fixed on

the menu. "So if you relocate, you should look for a city that has lots of colleges."

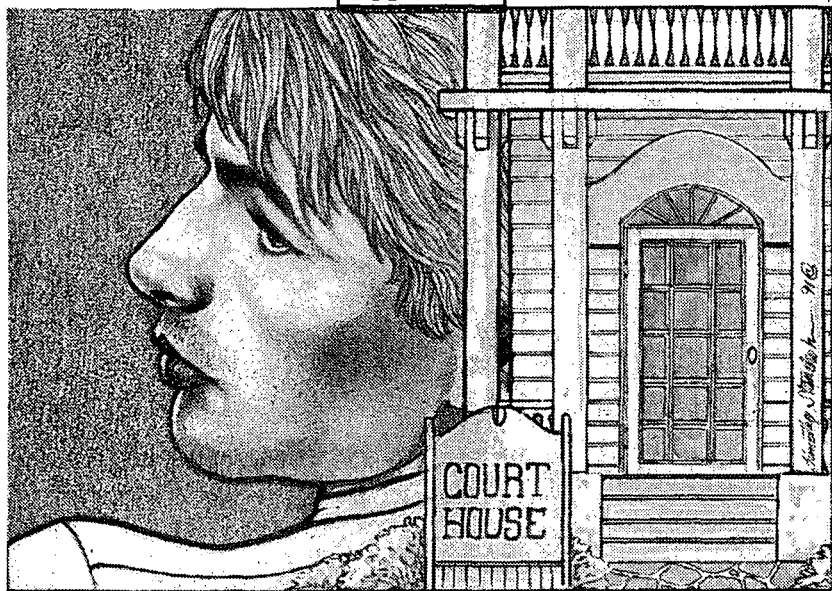
"That makes sense," he agreed.

"It certainly does. Now, if you want to feel at home in an academic atmosphere, you should increase your store of general knowledge. Let's see if you've improved any." She put the menu down. "Try this one: Largest city in Massachusetts, famous for baked beans and scrod and many magnificent institutions of higher education."

He reached for her hand, hardly daring to interpret the hint. "Boston?" he said tentatively.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Jim!" she said, exasperated. "When will you learn to put it in the form of a question?"

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The Inquest

by Elliott Capon

I remember the Crawford inquest so clearly because it was the very first one I ever sat on.

John Crawford was found on the road to town, a little bit from his farm. His head had been bashed in with a rock, and to make even surer, his killer had sliced his throat open a few times. We knew it weren't no animal that did it, improbable as that would've been, because Crawford's horse was found nearby, cropping at the grass as calm and content as one would wish.

Well, there was a big hoot and holler when the body was discovered, as you might well imagine, but within a very reasonable

time the body was brought into town, to the courthouse.

We weren't a state then, still a territory, so there was no nearby sheriff or police force to call in; it would've took days for someone with government authority to arrive, and in the summer heat . . . it was in everyone's best interest to get poor John Crawford interred as quickly as possible. In cases such as this, an inquest was called, and a group of citizens was asked to sit in and try to find the facts of the case and determine who may've been guilty. I was among those asked, and I took it as my civic duty to agree to serve.

Even though we had no judge other than the circuit rider, we had a courthouse, better than fifty years old, which was used for all kinds of meetings and functions and whatnot. Crawford's body was laid out, gentle and with respect but just like it was found, on a long table. A very large piece of canvas was propped up behind it, denying the public any view of the deceased, but open on the side so that the twelve of us sitting as the grand jury would see the body. Witnesses were to be called, you see, and it was a scientific fact that when a murderer approached the body of his victim, the wound would bleed a little, even though the body be cold and stiff. Now, I'm a little bit better read than most of my neighbors, and I still don't know why that's so, but I know that it is. It's one of them things you can't explain, like how we know that a plant needs water and sunlight but we don't quite know *why*. There's just some facts that is facts, and that's that.

Every time there was a death in Bountiful there'd be an inquest, and I'd seen several from the other side of the table. Usually the deceased was known to have been ill, or there was an undeniable accident, so inquests took a few uncomfortable minutes. Since we didn't have no governmental law officer, inquests was usually presided over by Gooden. Doc Gooden wasn't able to run this one, since he was over at the Carter farm where all six of the Carter kids had the scarlet fever. So Aaron Hart, who owned the general store and ran the post office and was sort of the unofficial mayor of Bountiful, he asked Kissinger to preside. Doc Kissinger really had no choice but to agree.

Like a number of the young men who were to file in and out of the courthouse that day, Doc Kissinger had served in the Union army and come out west after the war to make his fortune. Doc Kissinger wasn't a real doctor, he was a veterinarian. That was what he'd done during the war, cared for the horses that served the Union army, and come out to Bountiful after his hitch was up

to take care of the livestock in our portion of God's earth. He knew his stuff, I guess, but most of us considered him 'a little—I don't know, a little odd. It was one thing to be a horse doctor, but we all got the impression he liked animals better than people. Stories were told of how he'd come across an accident, a cart overturned, and people lying bleeding and moaning in a ditch, and he'd go over first and see to the damn horse, who was stronger than ten men and ten times as able to take care of himself. I know that some of them stories is true, and I've got the right arm a half-inch shorter than the left to prove it, when bones that didn't get prompt medical attention knitted themselves poorly. Still, when it come to horses or cows or pigs or even dogs, you couldn't shake a stick at Doc Kissinger. And being as how he was a doctor, legally he could preside over our inquest.

So we all gathered in the courthouse, on a hot day in August. There was twelve of us on the jury—me and Aaron, Dick Clemens and Johnny Depugh and Jack Martin and Mel Peterson, and old Pappy Green, who always used to say he was a cabin boy for John Paul Jones and probably was, and five other local worthies. I remember the gasp that went up from us when Mr. Winner, the undertaker, and his son Jeb lifted the canvas to adjust it so that only we on the jury could see Crawford. We'd all seen death, we knew death, but none of us had ever seen it like this. There was three members of the jury who'd fought in the Civil War, I myself served in that little dustup with Mexico in '47, and Pappy claimed to have seen action when he was but fourteen years of age. But somehow the horrors of battlefield death was different than what lay before us. A thousand bodies lying on a bloody plain was somehow *right*; John Crawford laying there with his head smashed and his throat cut was, was *wrong*. And it was up to us to find out who his killer was.

As I said, we sat on chairs facing the table on which Crawford was laid out. Beyond him was the rest of the room, and the door through which witnesses would be let in; at a lectern near the foot of the table stood Doc Kissinger, looking uncomfortable. I didn't know if he was ill at ease in the presence of the dead body or all the living ones—human ones. While he cleared his throat and began to think of things to say, I let my thoughts drift over the deceased.

I've sat on two dozen inquests since this one, and I've read, in newspapers and in fiction, about a hundred more, and there seems

to be one of two common threads in them: either the murder victim was the most beloved, well-liked, adored member of the community, or he was the most hated, despised, meanest and cruelest son of hell for fifty miles. Neither of these, though, applied to Crawford. John Crawford was just an average man. He was what I like to call a "Hi-how-are-ya" fellow. You know, we'd see him and his family at church on Sunday or at the market on Wednesdays, and we'd all say, "Hi, how are ya?" and we'd chat for a few moments, and then go about our business. Like most of the kids in Bountiful, his kids attended school when they could, and were no better nor worse dressed, no better nor worse behaved, no smarter nor dumber than any other kids. The Crawford family had a farm, not much bigger nor smaller than any other farm in Bountiful. His wife was no prettier nor uglier than any other wife. They rarely missed church, never missed the Fourth of July celebrations, attended all the socials and bees and picnics and whatnot. His Mary always had some old but clean and serviceable garment to donate when the Charity Ladies made their Christmas collections. John himself was always ready to lend a hand in mending a fence or building a barn, or hoeing a few extra rows when a neighbor was sick and never too proud to ask for a little help when he himself needed it. All things considered, he was just an average . . . oh, what's that word? . . . *innocuous* man, a man with a few friends, many acquaintances, lots of neighbors, and, so far as anyone knew, not an enemy in the world. Not the kind of man to be the victim of a violent murder. Not the kind of man at all.

Doc Kissinger cleared his throat. Again. "Um . . . I guess we should get this proceeding under way?" he asked. He looked at Aaron, who just nodded, giving permission. "I, uh, I, I guess I call Mrs. Mary Crawford?" Again Aaron nodded, and Billy Jasper, who had sort of volunteered to be doorkeeper, or sergeant at arms, or whatever, opened the door to the next room where all the potential witnesses—indeed, most of the adult population of Bountiful—was gathered. We all rose in silent respect as Mrs. . . . as the *Widow* Crawford come into the room. She hadn't had time to get into proper black rags, and she hadn't had much time to get over the shock, but like I said, it was a hot day in August and it was better we rush than expose ourselves and John to further indignities.

And speaking of indignities, it was about this time that I noticed, out of the corner of my eye as we all sat down again, that Johnny Depugh had sort of appointed himself as keeper of the deceased.

The windows in the courthouse was all open, of course, and few things attract them big bluebottle flies like a dead mammal. Poor Crawford already had one or two of them unwanted guests, and Johnny took it upon himself to keep his fellow John free of the pests. He moved his chair closer to the corpse and kept a vigilant eye on it, swatting at every fly that tried to land on the deceased, careful not to touch Crawford, but giving no insect a second's rest on the body. He didn't take his sight off Crawford for an instant during the entire inquest, and I doubt very much if he paid any attention to anything that went on. But I will say that no fly so much as got one leg rubbed against the next before Depugh shoed him away.

So anyway the Widow Crawford comes in, and the Reverend Dillon, who didn't have to be there by law but always come to inquests as part of his ministerial duties, swears her in on his old Bible. I seen more formal inquests where the swearing in is done by a governmental official, but like I said, this was good enough for us.

Poor Mary takes a seat, and Doc Kissinger stammers out a few words about how the whole town shares in her grief and offers its sympathy and anything we can do, etc., etc. I don't think she heard him at all, 'cause when he said, "Mrs. Crawford, when did you last see your husband?" he had to ask her three times till she answered.

"Oh," said Mary. "He . . . he was just going to run into town, he says . . ." Her voice trailed off and she kind of looked at the canvas-covered lump in front of her, as if asking John when he was going to get up and come back home.

"For what purpose, ma'am?" Aaron asked. Aaron has known Mary Crawford for fifteen years, and has called her "Mary" for at least ten, but now he called her "ma'am" and we all thought that was a good thing, especially Doc Kissinger. I seen him breathe a sigh of relief when someone else took over the questioning.

"Excuse me?" Mary asked.

"Why was he going to town?" Aaron gently repeated.

"To . . . to ask Doc Kissinger if he would stop by in a day or so. Some of our pigs was doin' poorly, an' J-John thought maybe the doc could look at them." Her eyes'd been dry till this point, but now they got wet and tears began to fall down her cheeks. "Damn pigs," she said through her crying. "If it weren't for them, he'd be alive." Then she started blubbering and crying for good, as if she finally realized for the first time that John wasn't never coming home,

and Billy Jasper gently put an arm around her and took her out of the room, where we could see some of the other women take over.

Doc Kissinger looked kind of pale, and had his hand over his mouth.

"What's the matter, Doc?" Aaron asked him.

Kissinger waited a few seconds before answering. "There weren't no need for him to come get me," he said. "I think I was already at his farm when he got murdered."

"What's that mean?" Pappy snapped. Pappy always snapped. If he'd'a been the murder victim, I don't think no one would've been surprised.

"I'd been over to see Matt Salter, his speckled sow was having a hard birth," Doc Kissinger said. "Eight piglets, we only lost one. The first one, it was breech, I had to dismember it in the womb." That was our vet. With a human being laying there dead, he'd tell us all about the birth of some pigs. "So anyways, after I got done with Salter, I remembered I hadn't been to Crawford's for a while, so I come up across Salter's alfalfa field and to the Crawford farm. Neither John nor Mary was there, but I saw the girls and they let me look to the animals. They said their pa'd gone to town, and their ma was doin' the wash over to the creek. John must've been on his way, on the road, when I got to his farm from the back way. God, if only he'd left a little later . . ." Again the hand went to the mouth, and it looked like he was fighting down a reappearance of his breakfast.

"You was there when they discovered the body, right?" I asked. I'd heard something to that effect.

"Well, later," Doc said. "By the time I left the Crawford farm, Wyatt Kidd and Mr. Winner were already there. I think Wyatt found the body, and he called Mr. Winner, and when I got there they was loading him into the hearse."

"Mmmhmm," I said. I didn't have nothing more to say, but I felt that I'd contributed something to the proceedings.

"Why don't we go ahead with the inquest," Aaron suggested.

"Uh, sure," Doc said. He looked down at a piece of paper he had at the lectern. "Call Wyatt Kidd."

Jasper ushered Wyatt Kidd in. Kidd was a well-known figure in the territory, a dealer in pots and pans and soap and clothing and penny novels and patent medicines and Indian jewelry and everything else you could think of and some you couldn't. We all figured

he'd come over on the *Mayflower* and would be the first man to fly to the moon, he was such a permanent fixture in the territory. He lived in his wagon, and never took himself a wife, always liking to say with a smile and a wink, "I got a wife in every woman in the territory, what do I need to tie myself down with just one for?" and he'd laugh and we'd all laugh with him. If Wyatt'd said that he'd seen little green fairies with two heads attack John Crawford, that would've been it and we would've closed up the inquest on the spot.

"A sad day, gentlemen, a sad day," he said as soon as he sat down. "I've known John Crawford since he was a little boy. A good man, a decent man." He shook his head.

"Uh, yes, of course, we agree, Wyatt," said Doc Kissinger, "but, uh, could you, uh . . ."

"Could you please tell us how you discovered the body?" Aaron helped him.

"Sure. Of course." He paused and stopped to watch Johnny De-pugh chase one particularly persistent bluebottle from Crawford's eyes. "I was bringing my wagon up to the Crawfords'. I'd got in some of that special curing salt that the missus likes so much. Seems that poor John here hadn't done too good a job curing his last batch of hams and they was all spoiled, so they was going to have to do themselves another slaughter to get ready for the winter and poor Mary wanted to make sure it was done right. She'd asked me, when I got the salt, to make a special trip, she'd pay for my trouble, 'cause they needed it in such a hurry. So I was on my way up to the Crawford farm, and I think it was about a mile away, Fred Winner'll back me up, that I saw poor John layin' in the road. I could tell he was dead before I got down off the buckboard, poor devil. His head was all smashed in, like with a rock, or a club, and his throat was all cut. But just . . . I mean, I don't know why, I got down to examine him, as if . . . as if maybe there was a miracle and he was still alive, even though I knew he was dead. But his head was . . . it was all bashed in, two or three hits with whatever the murderer used. But now the throat . . . gentlemen, I ain't no doctor, and, Doc, you'll verify this, but, gentlemen, I know knives. I been selling knives for near on forty years, and I can tell you that them slices across poor John's throat wasn't made by no hunting knife or whittling knife or common kitchen knife. No, sir, they was made by something real sharp, real keen. I sold a scalpel just last month to Doc Gooden that was capable of such a kind of cut."

"You saying Doc Gooden killed Crawford?" Jack Martin asked.

"No, no, Jack, what I'm sayin' is that it were a real sharp kind of knife that cut poor John's throat, a clean-cuttin' knife. I know that's the kind of thing that's important to know when you're investigatin' a murder." He took a deep sigh, watched Depugh capture a bluebottle in his hand and mash it against his thigh. "So I got back in the wagon and turned and flew like a bat out of hell, forgive me, Rev'rend, and went to find Doc Gooden, only he wasn't at home, so I fetched Winner. I went back with him and we was loadin' poor John into his hearse when Doc Kissinger rode up." He allowed himself a little laugh and winked at our vet. "This sure ain't no time for funnin', Doc, but it did strike me amusin' that the first thing you did when you come upon us was to rush over to poor John's horse to make sure it didn't wander into the nettle bushes." A few of us smiled weakly; that was Doc Kissinger, all right.

Aaron asked Wyatt a few pertinent questions about if he'd seen anyone on the road, anyone at all, who could be placed into proximity with Crawford. Wyatt swore he'd seen no one, no one at all, and like I said, if there's one man we'd all believe, it was Wyatt Kidd.

There was a long, uncomfortable silence after Wyatt was dismissed. "Now what?" Doc Kissinger asked.

"We've got to have more witnesses," Aaron said, slowly and thoughtfully. "Ain't a proper inquest without enough testimony."

"Who?" the doc asked.

I had a thought. "How about Tad?" I said. "He lives next to Crawford, maybe he knew something we don't."

"Is he here?" Kissinger asked.

Aaron allowed himself a little snort. "Whole damn town is here," he said. "Excuse me, Rev'rend."

Jasper was sent to bring Tad in. Tad's real name was Thaddeus Somethingsomethingsomethingseski, so we all just called him Tad. He'd come over from some place called Bratskoslovia, or something, but he'd been a hog farmer there, and so was more than welcome in Bountiful. A good man, Tad, though he spoke English just a little better than his wife, a shy girl who didn't speak it at all, but their little boy seemed to be learning to speak just like a real American. He brought with him a lot of techniques and methods that had really helped us in our porcine husbandry. (We had this visiting lecturer come around once, about six years before, wanted to charge us ten cents a head to listen to a speech on

"porcine husbandry." We done everything but tar and feather him out of town, and that phrase has now become a big joke around here. We was pig farmers, and Tad was a big help.) Tad owned a small farm on the other side of Crawford's from Salter's, but he produced at least twice the pork of anyone in the territory.

Tad looked awful sick when he come in, I found out later more from fear of official doings than from the sight and stench of death—in Bratskoslovia, when you're summoned to something somber and official, you just kiss the family goodbye and tell them to remember you on holidays.

"Did, uh, did John Crawford have any enemies that you know of?" Doc Kissinger asked him.

"No, sir," Tad whispered.

"Speak up a little, Tad," Aaron said. "We're all friends here."

"No, sir," Tad said, too loudly. "I didn't know of him having no enemies, sir."

"Nobody who'd wish to see him dead?" Aaron asked.

"Nooo . . ." Tad twitched, sort of half-snorted, and cleared his throat. "No."

"Tad, you want to say something. Say it." This was from Mel Peterson, who was sitting next to me and was our blacksmith.

"I have a silly thought, is not right for to speak in these times," Tad said.

"Go ahead," Mel said. "Like Aaron said, we're all friends. I don't think John will be offended."

"Vell . . ." Tad's twitch returned, and grew into a grin, which he quickly wiped. "Is not to be unrespectable of the dead, but I can tink of someone who will want Crawford dead." He paused, looking at all of us. His grin came back and stayed. "His pigs."

"His pigs?" at least eight of us said.

"He vas a nice man, a goot, a honest man," Tad continued, "but he knows nothing from raising pigs, from keeping them alive and well and fat, and from making from them the good bacon. I tink his whole spring slaughter, he ruin all the meat, he tell me he going to have to slaughter new, at dis time of year, to keep meat for the winter. I tell him, no, John, first, pigs too young to make the meat, and then, you kill now, you don't have them to make more pigs for next year. He don't listen to me, neffer. I tink maybe if the pigs find out, dey gang up and try to kill him. Sick," he continued with a shake of his head, "many sick pigs. I tell him how not to give his pigs the worms, the disease, we call *pashtishta*, I

don't know how you call in English, but he don't listen to me, all his pigs sick with it." He turned toward Doc Kissinger. "You must seen, you know."

Doc Kissinger nodded. "Yes, Tad. But pigs don't cut a man's throat," he whispered.

Tad shrugged. "From who cuts his throat, I don't know. From who wants him dead, if I'm a hog, I wants him dead."

We dismissed Tad and sat there looking at each other. "Can you . . . can you think of anyone else to call?" Kissinger asked Aaron. Aaron looked down at the floor and shook his head. "'Fraid not, Doc," he said. "I don't see how we can—"

We heard Jasper yell "Hey!" and little Ellen, Crawford's twelve-year-old, exploded past him and into the room. "I wanna see Pa!" she cried.

Faster than I've ever see him move, Aaron was up, around the table, and had ahold of the little girl before she could get to the canvas mound. "Not now, sweetheart," he said. "At the funeral. He's all dirty now, wearing dirty clothes. Mr. Winner's gonna clean him up and dress him nice and you can see him then. He wouldn't want you to see him all messed up like this." What he didn't say was that Winner was going to put a wig on him and sew up his throat. I'd always liked Aaron, but from that moment on, I admired him, too.

Ellen, still in Aaron's grip, turned her tearstained face toward Doc Kissinger. "You!" she said. "When you come back, you said you'd look for Pa! If you did, they wouldn't a killed him! It's your fault!" She extracted herself from Aaron's arms and fled the room, crying hysterically.

"Came back?" Aaron asked. "What does she mean?"

Kissinger was so white he looked like he oughta be the one laying on the table. He licked his lips and took a long time to answer. "After I . . . I examined the pigs, they were all sick with worms and . . . a dozen other diseases I could name, you fellows wouldn't know what I was talking about . . . Ellen told me her Pa . . . John was on the way into town to find me, so I set off to catch up to him and save him the trip. But I was about . . . about fifteen minutes from the farm when I realized that I'd left my medical bag, so I had to turn around and go back. I saw Ellen again and she asked me if I'd caught up to her . . . to John, and I said no, but I'd hurry now and try to save him the trip. So it must've been about an hour from when I first left the Crawford farm to when I . . . came across

Wyatt and Winner and . . . ” He took himself a deep sigh, a shuddering sigh. “Maybe if I hadn’t a forgotten my bag, I’d a caught up to him, and whoever did it . . . wouldn’t a done it.”

Aaron brought up his hands to rub his eyes. “Can’t blame yourself, Doc. What’s meant to be is meant to be.”

“God’s will,” murmured Reverend Dillon, and we all muttered amens in agreement.

“Let’s close this up, legally,” Aaron said, and we all, except for Johnny Depugh, rose to our feet.

“Aaron, can you . . . ?” Doc Kissinger asked. “I don’t know . . . ”

“Sure,” said Aaron. He took a deep breath. “We, the members of this panel, upon meeting in duly authorized inquest, do find the death of John Crawford, of Bountiful, to have been committed at the hands of a person or persons unknown. I, Aaron Hart, do so swear.” We all, giving our own names, did so swear. The reverend led us in a brief prayer, and we filed out of the room.

As I said, I remember the Crawford inquest so clearly because it was my first, but also for another reason. Thirty years passed, and finally the day come when Johnny Depugh, six times a grandfather, lay on his deathbed. I come to see him, me too a doddering old man, awaiting my turn at the Pearly Gates, and we sat for hours talking over things past and the new century that, if things went quite well, I might just be lucky enough to see. One of the things we spoke of was the Crawford inquest, and Johnny told me something curious that he’d carried with him for thirty years. It seems that as we all filed out of the room that hot August day, leaving our friend John to be ministered to by Fred Winner, Doc Kissinger, who didn’t seem to be feeling well himself, stumbled as he walked past the table. He put his hand out to steady himself, and he ended up touching John Crawford on the shoulder. Johnny, you remember, was doing fly duty, and didn’t take his eyes off the corpse for a minute. Thirty years later, Johnny Depugh swore to me that as soon as Doc Kissinger’s hand touched Crawford’s shoulder, a drop of blood like a tear welled up in John’s eye and run down his cheek.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

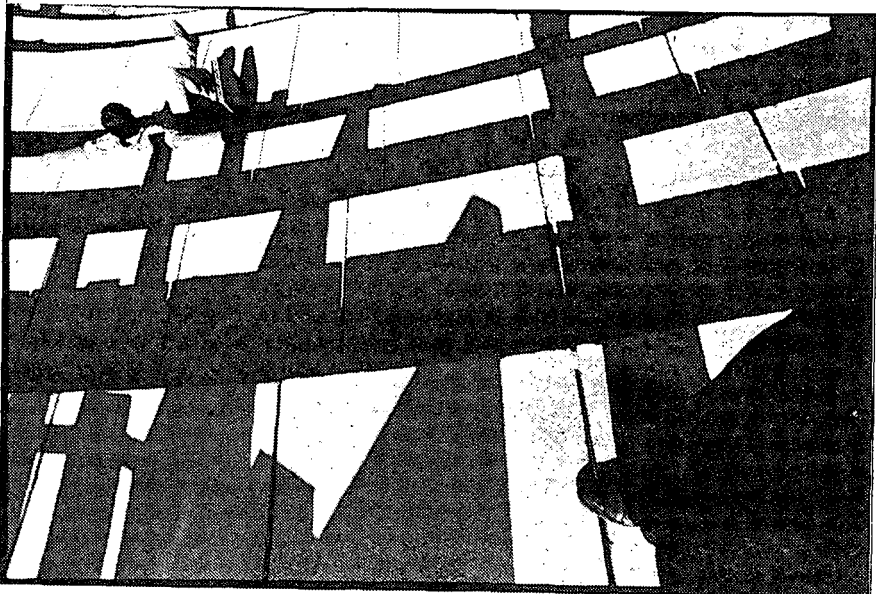


Photo by Algimantas Kezys

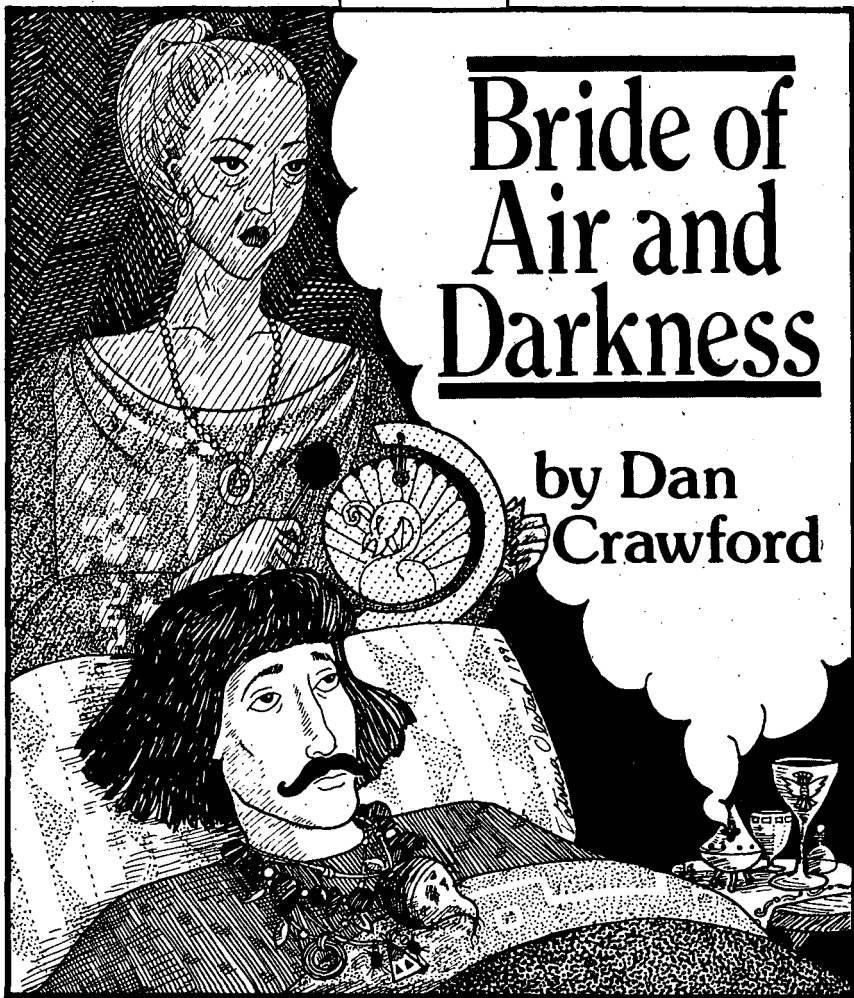
Palings. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017. Please label your entry "July Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the February Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

Bride of Air and Darkness

by Dan Crawford



“There’s no penalty for failure, is there?” Polijn asked the man who was ahead of her by virtue of the blue wand he carried.

“I have certainly heard of none,” he replied, turning to her and adjusting the mandol on his hip. “I researched the matter thoroughly before attending, and that was certainly the impression I was given. My attendance would certainly have been wholly elsewhere had there been any fine assessed for bad performance. I

Illustration by Patricia Olstad

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mean to say that though I value my duke, the value I affix to the entirety of my neck so far surpasses him as to be nearly treasonous."

Polijn sighed. He was obviously from around here. The people of western Silmariën were frank and honest and very respectful toward minstrels, an attitude too seldom encountered. But they did take an awful lot of words to get anywhere.

"Next group," said a court dignitary, opening the door. "This will be the group whose red leader has the large white wand. I mean to tell you that the red group has passed through and, failing of its objective, now makes way for its successors."

The competitors had been sorted into groups of four. Turns within each group were determined by the color of the wand each had plucked from a quiver: red, white, blue, and black, in order of the stripes on the banner of Derandis. Each person with a red wand also held a second, larger one to show the group's place among its competitors.

Three women and one man, each with an expression of hope or apprehension, as suited individual disposition, got up and filed from the room. The door to the duke's receiving room/bedroom fell shut with a bang.

Polijn knew she was going to hate herself for it, but she had to get all the information she could. She cleared her throat. "How did His Grace incur the curse?" she inquired.

Her companion was overjoyed to tell her, as were the other two would-be rescuers in her group. All three started at once, of course, each telling a different version of the tale, correcting or contradicting the other two when it seemed essential. But Polijn had been in western Silmariën long enough (it felt like lintik years) to cope with Silmarian conversation. You simply listened to every sixth word.

Lusior, duke of Derandis, one of the largest states in western Silmariën, had, shortly after succeeding to his father's title, ridden through a fairy circle, crushing a dozen mushrooms under the hooves of his horse. How such a thing could have happened was a mystery, for by ducal order going back centuries all such rings were marked with warning signs. (Polijn believed it. She had actually met the legendary Duke of Rychar, just a bit farther north, and could verify the song that said he had worn all his clothes inside out since childhood because of an error his nurse had made in not closing all the windows on the night of the new moon.)

Since that day, the duke had been unable to sleep. His aunt,

Lady Alia, had inferred that he was under a curse. Propitiation of the fairies brought no relief, and the duke had announced there would be a massive prize, payable in whatever currency the winner found most desirable, to whatever minstrel or storyteller could lull him to sleep.

From there on, there was little to say, though her informants said it anyhow. This was the third week of the contest, and probably the last, since Duke Lusior certainly could not last much longer. All the local experts were astonished by his complete resistance to all the ploys of Silmarian minstrels and bards. (Polijn, yawning, was impressed by it, too.)

She waited until the conversation had fragmented a little, with the red wand holder moving into a side debate with the white wand holder about whether mushroom dust damaged the eyes. "Are there a lot of magic sites around?" she asked the blue wand holder. "If you win the competition, I'll have to be walking out of here."

He smiled modestly, and then sighed with real regret. "Not really, not in these parts. That is to say, of course, that we have our fairy circles, in wet seasons, and our sacred groves, like any civilized people, and storied relics in the treasury. There are tales of some of the duke's swords that might astound you; I know they astound me. But for real sites, one must go farther east. The true magic seems to linger around the coast, where they grow dull, unimaginative souls. Perhaps silence suits the magic, perhaps not. It is not my area of expertise, for the very reasons you may infer. In our Riding, I wish to suggest, we have not a thing, not a thing out of the ordinary. Except, of course, the old Larstone. Perhaps you've seen it?"

Polijn had never even heard the word before, so she said, "I can hardly remember all the Larstones I've ever seen. Is this a tall stone, almost white, that rises gleaming over the road like an ice-giant?"

"That sounds striking," he said. "I believe I'd like to see that; you must tell me someday where it stands. On the coast, no doubt, where they have all the luck. No, ours is a flat, round stone, one man across. You can understand why no one pays it any mind these days, not after the one you've seen. In the east, was it? Along the coast?"

Polijn gave him some kind of answer and filed the Larstone away for possible use. If "The Nightingale on the Balcony" didn't lull the duke to sleep, she could make up some ritual that had to be performed on the Larstone to make it effective.

"Next group," commanded the herald. "I wish to summon the group whose red leader carries the large blue wand now. This is to suggest that the white group has passed through and, failing of its objective, now makes way for its successors."

Polijn and her company rose and passed through the big door. On the other side a servant took each performer by the hand, a courtesy that amused Polijn until they moved into the duke's chamber, and she nearly fell over a pillow on the floor. The singer ahead of her had kicked a reclining courtier, and those farther ahead were having similar difficulties as their eyes tried to cope with the lack of light.

Acrid incense rose from little brass burners, the smoke further obscuring a room only half-lit by candles flickering madly behind red screens. The room, Polijn could see, must be dark even at the best of times, for the walls were covered with dark leather hangings. Leather was plentiful down here: edged with gold, dyed in all colors. Coming from a land where only the wealthy could afford to go shod in leather, Polijn was impressed by how many people in Silmariën wore boots.

Everyone here was shod in slippers, though, and shuffled around in a hushed hurry, replenishing the censers or the wine glasses on the duke's table. A few dogs moped under the table, hoping for biscuits. But they made no sound.

At the center of the far wall was a little pavilion for table, dogs, and duke. This nobleman was laid out on a low couch surrounded by his closest counselors. He wore a thin blanket, a thin gown, and a collection of charms and amulets at his neck. Some feet in front of him was a low stool. He did not look up as the carrier of the small red wand sat down, unlimbered a tiny crank-harp, and announced, "Linnine of Porholin, East Riding." A tall woman behind the duke nodded, and the singer strummed the harp.

Linnine's contribution was a long, low song in which every third word rhymed, or tried to. His voice was a drab baritone. Two courtiers along the wall slumped as dreams overtook them. The duke simply shifted on the couch. A long, white hand came down to his shoulder. It belonged to the woman behind the couch. Her other hand reached back, took up a hammer, and struck a small gong. The duke and the rest of the court winced; the sound was low but resonant, and echoed around the ceiling of the high room.

Linnine understood the signal, broke-off his song, and rose. The tall woman beckoned to a pair of women who brought fans forward to each side of the couch and began to wave them, one fanning

incense toward the duke, the other fanning it away. While they worked, the carrier of the white wand took Linnine's place.

"Anvers of Sortori," he announced. "West Riding." He waited for his signal and started in, unaccompanied by an instrument, on a long, low drone of a song. It seemed to Polijn that this must put anyone to sleep, but there was some unfortunate note in it. First one dog's ears pricked up and then another's. A big brute with black ears tipped his head back and began to howl along. The rest of the dogs joined the chorus.

The tall woman's gong echoed again, and everyone in the room simultaneously hunched up their shoulders. "No one will ever be able to sleep with her hitting that thing," whispered Polijn as Anvers of Sortori tried to argue his dismissal, gesturing at the dogs.

"Speak her fair," whispered the next contestant. "It's Lady Alia, His Grace's aunt. She will be duchess should anything happen to our duke; you may infer she is next to him in all things. I mean to say that while her approval is not necessary to human happiness, you're better off dead than disapproved. She commands all during the duke's indisposition, and has done all this to bring him back to health. She . . ."

Anvers was being carried out of the room. The next performer was to be brought forward while the room settled down. Polijn watched as Lady Alia leaned forward, murmuring something to the duke as she gestured to the wine. His Grace shifted but did not otherwise seem to reply.

Lady Alia was a very tall woman, once thin but now broadening a bit with age. Her complexion was pasty, or at least looked it in this light, and Polijn read temper in the turn of her eyes and the cut of her chin. So she had done all this, eh? Chosen this big, echoing room and filled it with incense and those madly flickering candles. How inventive!

"Leyamis of, er, Sortori, West Riding," said the third performer. He shifted a little on his stool and glanced up at Lady Alia to see if his countryman's tantrum had prejudiced the crowd against him. Seeing nothing helpful, he cleared his throat and embarked on a deep bass chorus that ebbed and flowed like the tide. Lady Alia herself seemed to sway, and Polijn felt herself nodding. The duke closed his eyes for a second, and she could hear everyone in the room draw a breath. Then he shifted onto his back and the eyes opened to stare at the ceiling.

Lady Alia seemed to nod but waited for the second chorus to

strike her gong. Leyamis made no protest but moved out of the room swiftly on long legs.

Polijn stood up and relinquished her black wand into the hand of the waiting courtier. She stepped up to the stool and bowed first to the duke and then to Lady Alia. "Polijn," she said. "A minstrel of the north."

The duke rolled over and turned bleary eyes on her. Lady Alia frowned, but Polijn provided no more information. They could tell by her accent that she was from the north and were curious to know more, but professional minstrels were creatures of power and mystery, a step below sorcerers in the regard of the Silmarians. They did not often brave the long, empty stretches in this part of the world: Courtiers sat up, newly alert, to listen.

Polijn had her own reasons, besides these atmospheric ones, for not mentioning Rossacotta. The farther you got from that country of ill omen, the worse its reputation. Silmarians, hearing of it, might well burn her and have done rather than risk letting her come near their duke.

"The Nightingale on the Balcony" was completely abandoned; it would never do. She needed something that would catch her audience, the whole audience; anything that would keep that long white hand away from that gong.

So, with a wink at the duke, she charged into "The Horseman and the Widow," a good, loud, long song with a little something in it for everyone, coarse or refined. There were at least a hundred verses; Polijn knew sixty of them well enough to perform them here, and improvised two more that mentioned Silmariën and the Duchy of Derandis specifically.

A few of the courtiers chuckled cautiously. Lady Alia didn't go that far, but she did stay her hand until the end of the song, and smiled at Polijn when the tale was over.

"Very entertaining," she said. "Amusing, indeed. One might say enjoyable. Diverting, if you will: I fear that perhaps the courtship verses were a bit warm for this gathering, but perhaps among the younger generation this sort of thing is acceptable. I wish to say that I am not as young as once I was, myself, and found them a trifle suggestive. In any case, the song was entertaining, marred only by the odd noises, made, I infer, by the dogs. There they are, the . . ."

The crowd was staring. Lady Alia rolled her eyes down. The growling sound came, in fact, from the duke, who was on his back and snoring.

Polijn nodded. All he needed was something that would get his mind away from thinking about how hard he was trying to get to sleep.

She rocked backward suddenly as three courtiers grabbed the stool, hauling it, and her, to their shoulders. Twelve guards closed in around the duke's couch, hands held over their mouths. Polijn glanced back at Lady Alia, who looked at her nephew and shrugged.

Clinging to the stool, Polijn was carried from the room and out into the courtyard of the palace complex. Once the crowd reckoned itself to be at a safe distance, a roar of "All cheers for Polijn-of-the-North!" rolled out. She had to use one hand to hang onto her hand-harp and another to stay on the stool as her bearers tried to hoist her high enough for everyone to see.

Fortunately, the procession lasted only until they reached the banquet hall, one of those long, broad buildings that the Silmarians favored, with hatches that opened to the sky. They carried her up to a place of honor at the head table there, but the maneuver of getting the stool to the floor again was too much for them. Polijn rolled off into a mass of thick cushions on a low couch. After a quick check to be sure she'd damaged nothing in the drop, she reclined as gracefully as she could under the circumstances and took the wine glass that was thrust into her hand. Her throat was a bit dry, and if the other Silmarian banquets she'd attended were anything to go by, she would be called upon to make speeches.

For a while, the crowd marched around the table and couch, raising cheers in her honor. They were just settling onto their own couches or benches when Lady Alia walked in and it started all over again. The duke's aunt waded through the celebrants to stand at the head table, her hair tight and severe under a tiara she had donned since leaving the audition room. Polijn rose to meet her and was introduced to the five men who had followed in her wake, her husband and sons. These men bowed to Polijn with great respect and acute awe. Their wife and mother was polite, and perfectly gracious. But every time those eyes raked down her, Polijn felt as if she'd been stripped to the blood.

Polijn had been reading eyes for years. As she settled back onto the couch, she could see some in the crowd that had already begun to cool, moving from her to Lady Alia and back again, measuring, weighing, laying odds. She couldn't tell which way the eyes were betting, but she knew where she'd put her money. The sooner she got her reward and directions for the quickest road out of Derandis, the healthier it would be.

But, of course, all the preliminaries had to be gone through. The food was excellent and plentiful, though somewhat heavily spiced, and the speeches in her honor were no more foolish than she could bear. But she had had a long walk to the palace this morning, and as afternoon ground into night, she began to yearn for sleep herself. She had attended longer banquets at home, but this was certainly the biggest affair she'd ever seen in honor of someone's nap.

Hours into the party, a liveried messenger came to Lady Alia, who leaned in toward his whisper and then left the room by way of a tapestry behind the head table. Polijn heard her talking fiercely to someone as she returned. "I mean to say they smell different up north."

Polijn turned to look just as Lady Alia stepped into the room behind Duke Lusior. Polijn was glad now of the hatches in the ceiling; had that ceiling been solid, the waves of sound that hit it as the crowd leaped to its feet and roared with approval would have shaken it down.

The duke looked a more striking figure standing up. His eyes were still a bit weary, but he had plenty of stamina, most of which showed in the standard cape-over-bare-chest ensemble favored by the men of western Silmariën. Lusior was a square-built, muscular specimen with a firm jaw, a snub nose, and curling hair. He planted his hands on his hips to survey his cheering subjects, and then he leaned to one side to pass some comment to his aunt from the corner of his mouth.

Lady Alia nodded to the spot where Polijn stood, having risen from the couch as the crowd chanted approbation. The duke looked a little startled, perhaps that so powerful a singer should be so small. But then he came forward with a warm, broad smile that made a dimple peep out on one browned cheek.

Taking Polijn's hand, he sat down on the couch on the high platform, signaling his subjects to take their seats again as well. Polijn had to follow her hand, of course, and sat down next to him. He seemed to be sitting awfully close. But it could be that he was simply built to take up a lot of room and, in any case, it was his couch, so Polijn did her best not to pull away.

Various court officials were signaling for silence, and the crowd noise dulled to a low rumble. "Well!" said the duke, looking them over. "I must say this is the first time I can remember ever being glad I'd slept through my supper."

Laughter smashed into the walls of the hall and made the leather hangings shiver. Lady Alia joined the merriment, but Polijn no-

ticed that her eyes remained fixed in Polijn's direction.

When this rolling noise had settled a bit, the duke raised the hand in which he held Polijn's. "And this is Polijn-of-the-North, the neat-handed, nimble-voiced Mistress of the Situation, that skilled liberator, our dextrous rescuer and apt deliverer, our proficient extricator in times of sorcerous malady."

He paused, and everyone took this to be a toast, drinking deep. Lady Alia did not drink. Her jaw was working and her lips were thin, and her husband and sons watched her with apprehension.

"Such service deserves its reward," Lusior went on when he had another chance. "That is to say, when anyone performs so nobly for the duke of Derandis, it behooves that duke to recognize said service, be it performed by one of his own loyal retainers or by the unretained. A reward, I feel, is clearly called for."

This declaration of the obvious was followed by further cheering and drinking. Polijn couldn't decide which was hurting her head worse: the cheering or the Silmarian style of speech-making.

"In recognition of those services with which I have had firsthand experience—as some of you might have heard, I have, in the past month or more, had more firsthand experience, and that of a forward and startling kind, of magic than my entire army could make use of. I mean to say that there has been a surplus of experience with magic in my immediate family in recent weeks—and being mindful of the counsel always given me by my nearest and dearest advisors, whose counsel is valued by myself and, I may add, by all thinking people (and who thinks more, reckoning length and breadth and depth, than they?), I have chosen what can be the only fitting reward, that is to say the only thing in my entire domain that can possibly be measured against the services of Polijn-of-the-North; that is: my entire domain."

In the sudden silence, Polijn sat bolt upright, her headache forgotten. This could really mean only one thing.

The duke looked vexed at the crowd's reaction. "If I am to live cursed," he said, "that is to say, if I am to make a habit of sleepless nights unless the spell is countered, then obviously it is in my best interests, and hence yours, to take one to wife who can counter the spell. For does a man not need his rest? I mean to ask you if sleep is not essential for life and health. What better grounds for choosing a wife than that she can put me to sleep?"

The audience was dubious. One or two retainers seemed to feel he was making a joke and assayed a laugh, which did not catch on. Polijn seized her chance as Lusior scanned the crowd.

"Your Grace does me honor, but such munificence is unnecessary," she said, in carrying tones to let everyone in the hall know that she was trying to back out of this as gracefully as she could. "The song you heard is well known among my people, and its power is such that you will find the curse is broken forever. That is, you may take it for granted that sleep will come easily to you once more." She looked to Lady Alia for verification.

The duke's aunt had not expected this, but she jumped on it. "Aye, Your Grace," she said, coming up to the couch. "Let us not forget all the tales we have heard of the haunted north. Rossacotta is in the north, and the Lost Mines, and the Land of the Lossuth, as well as, need I remind anyone, accursed Drawziw. I have heard, as no doubt others could retell better than I, how, if one travels far enough to the north, that is, is unwary enough to journey in a northward direction for long, one reaches a land where all the women are witches and the men magic-mongers of a startling and disconcerting kind. I have no doubt that our honored guest has represented her people in a powerful and positive manner."

The duke was listening, but he didn't seem to be taking it in. He threw Polijn a smile of reassurance and then, raising his chin, called to the crowd, "And what better wife, then, for the duke of Derandis, than a sorceress committed to our cause? Who better to preserve in the palace, at my side, than one who can counter the spells of our enemies?"

That presented the situation in a new light. The minstrel herself had said that the magic song was one well known among her people. What other songs and spells might she not have in her arsenal? The roar of approval was all but unanimous. Polijn opened her mouth but couldn't think of anything to say.

Just then, a curly head landed in her lap. The duke had kicked up his feet to recline on the couch. "Just sing that song again, would you, duchess?" he requested. "It was a nice little story, and I believe an encore would do me good. It may hap that I'll catch the ending this time."

Polijn had never hated an attentive audience more, but she sang until the duke's eyes closed again and he began to snore. Her eyes rose from his to Lady Alia's, where she read utter loathing. These festivities were rapidly becoming mortal.

But attendants came to carry the slumbering duke away, and Polijn was conducted to a small, luxurious room of her own. She shooed the servants out and took a wooden wedge from her pack. She jammed this under the door and checked the walls for hidden

passages. She certainly needed some sleep of her own, and she wouldn't get it waiting for a nocturnal visit from a servant of Lady Alia.

She propped herself into a corner of the bed, which was built into the wall. There were no hidden doors that she could find, but this might only mean they were well hidden, or that southern architecture had hiding places she wouldn't know.

Sinking into a fitful doze, she promised herself that if she lived until morning, she'd try to chat with the duke. He looked as though he might be reasonable.

But the next morning was a whirlwind of cloth and jewels as she and Lady Alia tried on wedding finery. That is, Polijn tried on clothes while Lady Alia sat back and munched anise-flavored nuts. Two dozen women fluttered on every side, bringing in garments and carrying them out again, asking Polijn her opinion and then turning to Lady Alia to have it verified, all of them obviously walking on eggs, not wishing to offend Lady Alia by being too civil to the northern interloper but not exactly wanting to irritate the woman who would likely be their next mistress.

Polijn bore it all as best she could, not once revealing her true opinion of the wispy green scarves they insisted were wedding dresses, not jerking away when they cinched tight velvet chokers around her neck. The heat no doubt had something to do with their concept of clothing. Polijn had certainly worn less, in the colder climate back home; it was just that in Rossacotta a prospective duchess would have been staggering under the weight of the finery. (You communicated your social status by showing off how much you could pile on.)

Anyway, she had more pressing concerns than whether wispy yellow or wispy green would be more flattering to Her Grace-to-Be's coloring. Some way to avert this coming nobility had to be found. Polijn knew very well she could counter no real spells, could not speak the convoluted language of western Silmariën for any length of time, could not even sit a horse. Such a duchess was surely doomed, even leaving Lady Alia out of consideration, and Polijn simply hated being doomed.

"Oh oh oh!" cried a hefty woman, who promptly dashed into the center of the room and hurled a swirl of pink crepe around the prospective duchess without showing any respect at all to Her Grace or to the three women fussing with Polijn's hair. These three started to scold, and Lady Alia sat up to referee the altercation,

but the reason for the hurried draping was revealed in the sound of booted footsteps coming to the door.

"Good morning to you all!" boomed His Grace, striding into the room and giving one of the women a swat on the backside in passing. Polijn took note of this: one more possible source of problems for his duchess. "And it is a good morning."

Polijn had had wild hopes that he might be coming in to announce that he'd changed his mind about the whole business, but he looked far too cheerful. Anyway, a duke could hardly revoke privately a reward he had announced publicly.

Lusior bade a gracious good morning to his aunt, his affianced, and the other ladies and then declared, "In the event of such a momentous occasion, it is naturally best to confer with the experts, that is to say, with those best qualified to offer advice. Therefore, I have had a consultation with our astrologers, those who read the stars, and have heard their advice and counsel. And in their judgment, tonight is an excellent night for a wedding."

Polijn had been dozing a bit under the accumulated weight of his greetings and this speech, but the last sentence came in with such unexpected speed that she jerked her head up and exclaimed, "Oh, no!"

The shocked eyes turned toward her naturally demanded some kind of answer. Polijn pulled her brains together and tried to compose one that would be intelligible to Silmarian ears.

"Among my people," she announced, "that is to say, among those people who were my people ere I became a minstrel, and thus in some sense one of those people who is of all people, and certainly long before I dreamed of becoming a duchess, and thus one of your people, in short, in my original home, away to the north, in lands both cool and damp, where, let me tell you, unwary travelers are oft retained throughout the winter as mileposts, for they freeze more solid than stone, it is a custom hallowed by generations, as one might say, a tradition with the approval conferred by antiquity and the seal of age, for a prospective bride to stand an all-night vigil alone, particularly if she has been chosen for the honor of marriage into a family of aristocratic background, as yours certainly is. I wish to suggest that your family undoubtedly *defines* the phrase 'aristocratic background'—sets a standard, I mean to say, for all other families of aristocratic background, leaving aside only, of course, the royal families such as that of His Majesty, Lord of Silmariën, though even there little exists to choose between his illustrious background and that of Your Grace."

"A vigil?" said Lady Alia. "To what purpose?"

Polijn turned to the duke's aunt and bowed her head just a second as a gesture of respect before going on. "A family so honorable, so venerable, so worthy and deserving of reverence, by which, of course, I refer to your family, or, as an example, that of some king or another, cannot be too careful when accepting a new member."

Lady Alia seemed to feel that was reasonable, and nodded encouragement. "So the vigil," said Polijn, "is an appeal through the dark of night to the stars, those cold, impartial arbiters and watchers of human affairs, those distant points of light that nonetheless cast such illumination on our own world in times of darkness when only the wise are awake, to judge and assess the prospective bride. If she is unworthy, she will be felled by the power of the stars, rendered inert, that is, in such a way as to leave her unable to take part in the nuptial festivities."

One of the serving ladies opened her mouth, but Polijn went on, encouraging belief with, "If she is worthy, the stars grant her great powers, of a nature that is best understood if seen, as they vary from person to person, since, after all, worthiness varies from bride to bride." She paused to catch her breath, and then added, as a clincher, "Such is the power of a vigil on a Larstone."

Thanks to her professional discipline, Polijn did not start panting as she finished with all this impromptu tradition. Lady Alia looked her over for any signs of untruth and then commented, in tones of complete neutrality, "Very interesting. I should like to hear the tale at greater length one day. A Larstone does this for a vigil?"

Polijn waited for her to go on, but this seemed to be all Lady Alia felt inclined to say. "Yes," said Polijn. "It does."

"Then, naturally, we shall do what we can to accommodate you in this matter," said the duke with decision. "It shall not be said that the Silmarians are backward in learning from the ways of other, older cultures, and in any case, it must be a matter of courtesy to oblige our future duchess in these things. Now, tell us: what, exactly, is a Larstone?"

Polijn felt the chill of sudden anxiety. "It . . . is a flat, round stone, one man across, a . . . stone of power and antiquity."

Her prospective subjects were much impressed and went into mass conference, asking one another and telling one another at the same time, turning to implore Polijn to describe the Larstone more but then turning away to implore someone else before Polijn could say a word. The duchess-presumptive stood tapping one foot. Come now, she thought; one of these women must be from the West

Riding. Naturally, the singer who had told her about the Larstone in the first place wasn't in the room. But it would spoil the effect entirely, and probably make Lady Alia suspicious, if she had to tell them where their own Larstone was.

At length, Her Ladyship's voice cut through the buzz of conversation. "I do not believe we have a Larstone," she said. "So I am afraid, much as it pains me to say so, that this vigil will be . . ."

"Your Grace, one moment, if Your Grace pleases."

Half a dozen people turned toward the woman who had spoken. She said nothing for a moment, a performance so astounding as to draw attention, and near-silence, from everyone else in the room.

"Well?" demanded the duke, his voice sounding a little nervous in the hush.

"It's just that . . ." she began. "Begging Your Grace's pardon, I am sure, for I mean no disrespect by bringing up such trivial matters in Your Grace's presence, but there was, in my childhood, some story . . . King Birulph and the Fogbeast, or some such. My old nurse . . ."

"Birulph!"

"Of course! That Larstone!"

"I believe I've heard that story a hundred times, but I never paid it much mind after I turned five. Or six, it might be."

"Was that a Larstone? I believe it was a Larstone. Where did the story put it? Where did they say it was?"

Polijn's shoulders went slack as she released a mighty sigh of relief. No one heard her.

Hours later, she hunched her shoulders up and released a shiver, walking around the big, cold hunk of rock where Lusior had handed her down from the ducal carriage. He had moved on with his caravan to set up a ring of guards just out of sight of the vigilstone, but close enough to see that no one intruded on his bride's meditations. Such a large company had naturally alerted most of the countryside. Polijn expected she'd have to wait hours before everyone started to doze off.

Even if they were more watchful than the average run of guards, she thought she had some chance of slipping away. She rubbed her hands together and studied the dark sky and empty fields. True, the open countryside was not her element, but if these Silmarians thought they could catch a Rossacottan born, once she had a head start, she'd teach them different.

In the meantime, there was work to do. She knelt next to the

Larstone and opened her pack. (Just one attempt to sit down on the rock, while wearing her flimsy wedding stuff, had convinced her that would never do.) She had insisted on bringing the pack, claiming there were "necessary ritual items" inside. Her spare clothes were still folded up in it. And there were further "necessary ritual items," requisitioned from the ducal court, that she could sell for eating money once she was clear of Derandis. But there were a few items she needed right now.

She pulled out a white handkerchief and tied a knot in one end. Below the knot, she wound a light scarf that matched her dress. She fastened it with her clasp. Pity about leaving the clasp, for it was real gold, but the ducal seal was probably identifiable by anyone for a hundred miles in any direction.

Scraping some of the wedding makeup from her face, she fashioned a crude copy on the knotted head of the doll. This would be Polijn-of-the-North, blasted by the stars for her presumption. Lady Alia could be counted upon to seize on the story, and it would doubtless last for generations, adding much more luster to the duke's fame than having her to wife would.

The wind slashed at her, and she pulled her cloak tighter around her waist. The cold was more than a matter of discomfort; cold air carried sound. She could hear the sound of booted feet crunching on frozen grass in the distance, and she thought she heard the murmur of voices above that. That meant they would hear her steps, too, unless she was careful. Could she really get away? How far would she have to go, moving slowly, carefully, before she got to someplace where she could change into something warmer?

If she failed, what then? She might be endungeoned for the insult, and what became of people in the dungeons here she didn't know. She shrugged and turned her back to the wind. There was always a way to talk her way out; they liked a good story in Silmariën, and they loved talk. Something about Birulph, since the Larstone had to do with that ancient king, at least according to local folklore. She'd find something to say that would keep her out of a cell.

Of course, that could be worse, for then there'd be the marriage to face. Polijn knew only a little about politics at the ducal court, but it was obvious that Lady Alia would be the first big threat. A Rossacottan might know a few tricks that would help, but it wasn't easy for any outsider to come in and try to supplant a native. And even if Lady Alia died suddenly, that still left a husband and four sons to seek revenge. The chances of Polijn's scoring a perfect six out of six were slim; she had seen people at home try and fail.

She blew on her hands. Silly even to think about it. Before she could feel her way to success, there'd be a knife in the dark or a burning in the stomach and she'd be through.

Everyone she had met outside of Rossacotta assured her that Rossacottans simply lived for such challenges. They had an inbred talent for intrigue, torture, and murder that was known from one end of the continent to the other. Maybe it was true. Maybe she could do it. Maybe she could survive as duchess of Derandis. She looked ten years ahead to a somewhat plumper Polijn, lolling on a leather couch, partially wrapped in flimsy scarves, bellowing out orders and eating every third peach in the bowl (handing the first two to tasters).

Polijn shivered, not entirely from the cold. Of course, there would be Duke Lusior as consolation. Nothing much wrong with him, provided you overlooked his snoring and the Silmarian style of conversation. He was a fine figure of a man: older than she was, but likely to last years yet if his aunt didn't finish him off. Still, she might outlive him; looking twenty years ahead, she saw herself as dowager duchess, waiting, like Lady Alia, for some woman to come in and take her power from her.

She shook her head, dashing the vision away. Not here. Any of the fates she had imagined for herself were likely to befall her; such things could happen to anyone. But not in Silmariën. This was not her place. She would take whatever finish was fated for her, but she wanted to take it in her home territory.

The wind shifted, slashing through her cloak, and she braced against it. The ducal palace in Derandis was a long way from the stable she'd had to share for a whole winter with her mother and sister. She sat down. That was what she preferred to staying here and being a duchess? It was home, of course: not the stable, but that city, that dirty, homely pit of misery where she could have a choice between dying of a fever in the spring or of an assault in some alley any day.

To be sure, the only place in Rossacotta where a minstrel could make a steady living was at the Palace Royal, an antique pile of stone whose residents worshipped the king and undermined his government. Anyone you addressed was plotting against at least five people for personal reasons and the government on general principle. To compete there was to court death. Death in the Palace Royal might not show the enthusiasm and ingenuity everyone outside her country assured her it did, but there was a certain amount of variety.

Polijn considered the possibilities, given the minstrels she would have to work against at the Palace Royal. She played out every scenario, with variations, going back over some of the more likely conclusions several times. Then she debated whether Lady Alia and her friends were familiar with some of the same methods and instruments. Was it likely that the duke's aunt would preside personally over the dissection, or delegate authority in the matter? And there was always the possibility that Lusior himself might order it, once the novelty of being wed wore off. On the other hand . . .

The night wind was rougher, blowing sand against her frigid arms. She shook her eyes open. What on earth was she doing, dozing off? She was freezing. Raising her chin, she could see she had spread herself out flat on the Larstone like dinner on a plate, letting precious body heat escape. What kind of an idiot would do that?

Her vision seem to cloud. She blinked. It wasn't her vision, just a cloud. And not even a cloud so much as a stain on the sky. The stain shifted. It came forward. Polijn knew, in that moment, that the thing was alive, and that it had come for her. She also knew that having been come for would prove unpleasant. She did not know whether she cared.

As she pondered this, instinct took over. Her legs kicked at the stone, throwing her off. When she hit the ground, she considered the possibility of making a run for it. It was unlikely that she would escape, that is, that mere mortal legs would be able to outpace an object clearly windborne. The creature rippled nearer, glowing a little, undulating. How could you dodge and duck something that could simply grow another tendril if it wanted to? She wondered whether the apparent arms and legs of the creature had any substance to hold her, and, if not, whether it was worth the bother of running at all.

And as the wind hit her in the face, she wondered why she was sitting there, frozen grass stabbing into her at a thousand tender points, thinking the way a Silmarian talked, when it was obviously time for action. She gathered her feet under her and sprang away from the creature, which wavered and rippled and then came after her. Polijn screamed for her guards. It wasn't that she thought they'd be able to do anything particularly, but if they got here soon enough, perhaps one or two of them would satisfy the creature's hunger. Why, oh why, had she never learned the song of Birulph and the Fogbeast?

No one answered her screams, so she gave it up and concentrated on running. The creature made no sound in following, but Polijn could tell by the faint glow hitting the ground near her feet that it was still coming right along. The glow neither shrank nor expanded; the beast was keeping a constant distance. It could probably see, as well as Polijn could, that there was no shelter or hiding place for yards around, and was content to wait until she'd run herself out of strength.

But Polijn had considerable stamina, though being city-bred she had seldom had occasion to use it on such a straight, open track. She knew there was a sizable guardpost back at the bridge they had crossed and, if her feet didn't freeze completely on the way there, she thought she could make it. No, she couldn't make it. Of course she could make it. If she did, of course, she would be rescued, only to go through that wedding after all. And that was death, too, so why not slow down and at least consider the possibilities of dying quietly here and now?

Polijn's steps actually did slow for a moment, but a shadow moved on the field ahead of her. She sped up; any distraction offered hope. The shadow appeared to be a cloaked figure, walking fast among the frozen stubble. Polijn now had no breath to call, so ran for it instead.

The figure kept coming, not even raising its head as the pounding of Polijn's feet echoed around it. "It's coming!" Polijn gasped, feeling it was her duty to give some warning at least.

The figure halted. Polijn ran up to it and reached out for an edge of the person's cloak. But just as she caught at the fabric, she saw the flash of the knife, upraised and catching the light of the creature in pursuit.

"Did you think I would leave you to beget dukes?" demanded Lady Alia. "Did you think you would be left alone in your vigil?"

Typical, thought Polijn: If Lady Alia hadn't felt that Silmarian urge to say something, she could have had the knife into Polijn by now and saved them both some trouble.

As it was, Polijn kept hold of the cloak and started to run again, hauling the duke's aunt around behind her and spinning the older woman off balance. Lady Alia would have to regain equilibrium, take her bearings, and then start in pursuit. By that time, Polijn reckoned, she should have a good seven yards' head start, and though Lady Alia had the longer legs, Polijn's incentive was more immediate.

The guardhouse at the bridge was no good now; Lady Alia's word

would have more weight than hers. Why had she been so intent on that post anyway? It was the last place she'd want to run to escape Lusior's hand in marriage.

A fraction of a second was all she needed to remember that she had been running from worse than that. This recollection coincided with the realization that no sound of running feet came from behind her: Polijn considered the possibilities in the time it took to run two steps, listened harder, and then glanced behind her.

Lady Alia stood stock-still in the field, her arms hanging at her sides, the knife dangling in one hand. Her cloak was open now, and flapped in the wind. Her eyes were wide and dead white, giving off a faint white glow.

"One sickly son," she announced, her voice carrying across the field. "All he had was the one sickly son, just that between me and the coronet. That was the only heir. I mean to say I was measuring for new curtains. But he lived, he lived, he lived to think of marrying. Dwindling I was, dwindling all the time: what's to become of me? What's to become of us? Daughter of the duke, sister of the duke, aunt of the duke. Then what? Then what? Grand-aunt of the duke and finally That Old Crone of the duke's family, with the missing teeth to match the missing stones in her tiara. She was never anybody."

Polijn knew what this meant. "Run!" she screamed, and actually turned and took three steps toward the duke's aunt.

"Poor relations, that's all we are," said Lady Alia. The fog collected around her. There was a scream, and the duke's aunt seemed to jump straight into the sky. The fog swirled around her like a cocoon.

Turning around again, Polijn resumed her top speed. Knowing nothing about fogbeasts, she had no idea how many victims its appetite might require. And since she didn't intend to tell this story to any Silmarian audience, she felt there was no need to investigate every single detail.

UNSOLVED

by Raymond
Smullyan

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the August issue.

"I remember another curious trial," said the White Knight. "It involved three defendants. Each of the three accused one of the other two. The first defendant was the only one who told the truth. Had each one accused someone different, but again not himself, then the second defendant would have been the only one who told the truth."

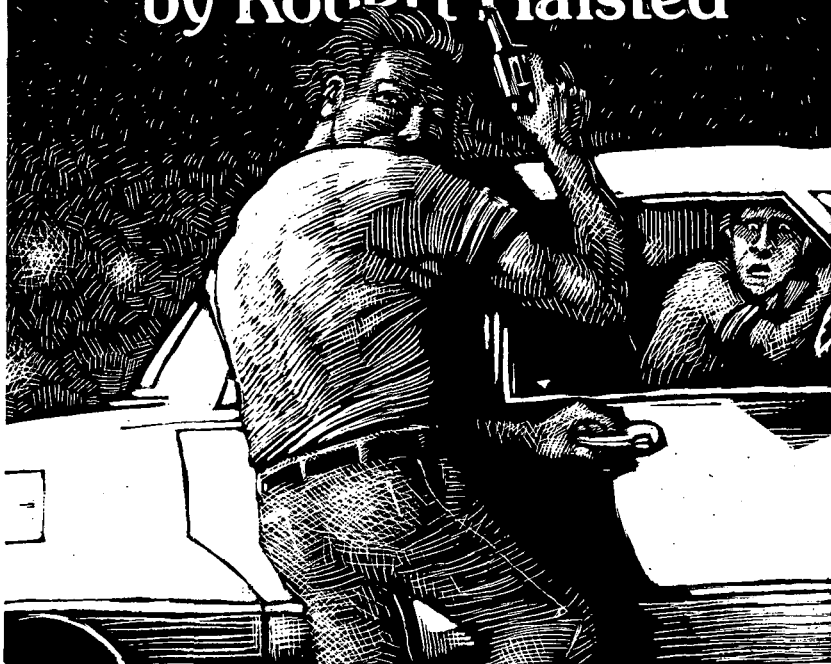
Which of the three defendants was guilty?

See page 149 for the solution to the June puzzle.

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Way Out

by Robert Halsted



I wanted out. I very much wanted out. So much that I was no longer looking for a comfortable way out, not even a guaranteed safe way. Just a possible way, with a chance of making it in one piece.

Not that I ever meant to be a career felon in the first place. It just sort of grew. I was probably only a little bit more overindulged and underdisciplined than the other kids of my generation, though I did make the

most of it. If I were a probation officer studying my case, I'd say "weak character" rather than "inherent criminal tendencies."

And here we were, holed up, hiding out, whatever you want to call it. Steve slammed the deck of cards down on the table and stalked to the window again, for the twentieth time. He pulled the curtain back a slit, same as usual. It had a greasy brown smudge on the hem from his hand.

"Where is that damn boy?" he muttered. For the eighteenth time. "No beer, no grub. We could freakin' starve to death."

I started to tell him for the fourteenth time it wasn't dark yet, but decided not to bother. Instead, for the ten thousandth time I ran down the same old rut from where I started to how I got in the corner I was in.

I never stole hubcaps. It was too much like work, and I was lazy. When I was in middle school, I shoplifted little things like transistors, expensive lighters, junk jewelry, mostly for fun. I gave them away, tossed them, sold a few for pocket money.

By the time I finished high school I was a little more commercial about it, but it was still just a profitable hobby. Then when I turned eighteen my stepfather kicked me out. Mom didn't stop him. Maybe she was

already disgusted with me, or maybe she has a weak character like mine. But at the same time I inherited a few grand that my grandmother, who had helped spoil me, had willed to me. So I got a place of my own and put in a few semesters at the community college till education and I got tired of each other.

About that time the inheritance ran out. They were getting ready to repossess my car—I'd paid cash, but took out a loan on it when I started running short—and I got an eviction notice the same week.

So that's when I got serious about professional crime. In a couple of days I stole enough miscellaneous junk to save my wheels and my lease—an expensive camera, some unguarded cash, a luxury grade ghetto blaster, jewelry. I got better and better for a few years, and it was easier work than pumping gas in a filling station, the only other job I was qualified for.

I never got caught because I was a coward. I even bragged about that, to the right people. Or maybe the wrong people. I never did anything risky. If I walked out of a store with something expensive, I had a good cover story. If I rolled a drunk, I made damn sure he was good and drunk. I didn't do too much

of that. It was too personal, like an insult.

I was too much an amateur for the cops to figure me out. I did a lot of different things, and never made much of a pattern. Once I made some small headlines in the local section of the paper as "The Yuppie Thief"—I'd go into a shop with a cheap goldplated chain or a dead wristwatch, leave it there and walk out with something much better. Once I ripped off a pawnshop that way while I was fencing some stuff to them. But when I started getting famous, I changed my approach.

Switch-and-walk was too good a technique to give up entirely, so I still did it once in a while, though not six times a week as I had been doing.

That's how I met Steve, in fact. I left a Hong Kong Special in a virginal leather case when the camera clerk's back was turned and walked out with a grand's worth of Canon in my old scuffed case.

I was halfway to my car in the parking lot when I felt a hard hand on my shoulder.

"Hey, buddy," said a voice as hard as the hand.

I swallowed and glued a stiff smile on my face. A store cop won't bust you till you're outside. Which I was. I turned to look at a face that made the hand and voice seem soft. He

was dressed very nondescript, sport shirt and off-the-rack slacks nearly the right size.

"Yeah?" I answered, trying to look as if I expected him to ask me directions or something.

"I saw your trick back there. I think me and you need to talk."

No use denying it. I grinned and said, "Yes, sir. Your place or mine?" I tried to do a lightening remodel job on my excuse. He didn't look like he'd buy the easy version.

"Just keep walking to your car." This was a twist. I didn't know what the hell was going on, but he had a certain authority, so I did as he said. I might have mentioned I'm a moral coward—I don't like confrontations. I just sort of go along and hope I can lie my way out of whatever comes up.

By the time he was sitting in the passenger seat of my X-Nissan I was beginning to get the idea, and what he said bore it out. This guy was a pro, and wanted somebody to work with. His previous partner was a guest of the state for a while.

He wasn't exactly my class of people, but opportunity wears a lot of different faces. What I'd been doing was just subsistence crime, shoplifting and petty larceny to buy groceries and the occasional personal ornament. What he was into was good pay,

a lot of fringe benefits, and a nice retirement plan. If, as I figured out later, you had the longevity to enjoy it.

The way he put it, my better choice was to go along with him. Which I did.

Even though he had a thing about being boss all the time—"strong dominance drive" is the way my sophomore psych instructor would have put it—it wasn't a bad year or two. Warehouse jobs, a lot of B&E stuff that made me queasy, but plenty of money coming in with our talents combined. He had the muscle and the drive for the job, but there was plenty of room left over for a little brainwork. We could afford the best in beefsteak, booze, and broads. Not cheap little chippies like you catch something from, but classy stuff like you serve to visiting VIP's.

Then the Big Thing happened.

We'd dribbled away all the take from our last job, and it was a matter of groceries. We borrowed a car from a parking lot—I was always careful to wear gloves—and I drove him to what I thought was to be a cash pickup from an old buddy of his.

If I'd known he was planning to knock off a neighborhood store, I'd have tried to talk him out of it. Not refused, just tried

to talk him out of it. If I had any conscience at the time, what it said was that you don't steal from real people, just from impersonal organizations, excepting maybe drunks and druggies and perverts. I never ripped off a buddy or a neighbor or even my family during my youthful adventures.

I even heard the shot, but I was too dumb to make the connection. It sounded farther away than it was. Then in a minute he came walking fast out of the alleyway up to where I was standing in a loading zone with the engine running. He yanked the door open and threw himself in all in one motion.

"Went sour," he said. "Get going."

I got going, not too fast, not too slow, like we'd practiced and done before. We left the car in a Kroger's parking lot a few blocks away and took a bus back in the opposite direction. The bus had to stop on a green light to let a bunch of sirens and flashing lights through, and still I didn't catch on. After I realized they weren't after us, I breathed a sigh of relief and the bus went on down the street.

When we got back to the apartment we were sharing, he was very surly and wouldn't say a word. Which wasn't unusual. I knew without being told it was a lay-low time, so I

opened a couple of cans in the kitchen.

When I got up the next morning he was already at the dinette table reading the morning paper. Without a word he passed me the front section.

It took about two minutes before I got all the jumble straightened out in my head, but that was the day I developed a conscience or compassion or something like that.

There were two pictures at the top of the page. One was a drawing that looked enough like Steve for someone to make an educated guess, though it was even uglier.

The other was, I thought at first, another of those horror pictures from the Middle East, the look-what-terrible-things-they're-doing-to-civilians kind of photojournalism. In the background a dead body and up front a girl with her hair pulled back in a ponytail, and her face in what looked like a frozen scream. Real nightmare stuff. But it wasn't Jerusalem or Beirut. The caption read, "Sixteen-year-old Krista Polenski reacts to news of her parents' deaths."

What the news story amounted to was this:

An unidentified gunman had apparently entered the Polenskis' storeroom behind their shop, through a door into an

areaway that opened into the alley. The door was usually kept open daytimes for deliveries.

The rest was a little confused. Apparently the woman had been tending shop, had reached for a gun under the counter, and had been shot by the gunman; the husband—the child's father—had, also apparently, had a heart attack coming down the stairs from their living quarters above. A customer had come in moments after the shooting, caught a glimpse of the gunman as he turned to leave, and dropped behind a display to keep from being shot herself.

Both the elder Polenskis were dead when the police and ambulance arrived. Then, minutes later, the girl came home from school, saw the emergency vehicles, ran into the shop, and learned that her parents were dead. That was when the photographer got his shot.

The address was right around the corner from where I was waiting by the alley for Steve. The time was the same.

My hands were trembling when I handed the paper back to Steve. I was about to throw up, and I probably looked like it.

"Time for us to split up and leave town, I guess," I said as

casually as I could. My voice was shaking like my hands.

"Nn-uh," he said, with the caricature of a grin on his face. "We leave town. We don't split up. You don't have the guts not to squeal."

So we headed west after dark. We stopped a couple of states away and lay low for a while, surviving by literal petty theft—stealing groceries, sleeping in the car, and washing up in restrooms—till we got the lie of the land.

That first week out of town I was on a foraging expedition when I passed a Catholic church with lights inside. On impulse I turned back and tried the door. It was unlocked, and I went in.

I thought I was supposed to sort of bow and kneel, or cross myself. I did both, but not very well. There were a lot of candles burning, but there didn't seem to be anyone there. I saw a sort of latticework cage that I thought might be the confessional. I half walked, half shuffled over to it and knelt down. I guess I had in mind confessing to Somebody, whether there'd been a priest there or not. Right then I believed for sure in the Devil, and only dared hope he had some opposition.

Then I saw a woman kneeling on the far side of the altar railing, and I just couldn't say

anything. I walked out.

When I got back to the street, I kept looking over my shoulder to see if Steve had followed me and was going to catch me up and give me hell for going into the church. I realized then how completely under his thumb I was. Which said more about me than it did about him.

We stayed there for about a year, just getting by. Our games didn't play as well there as they had in home territory—the local boys and the local cops knew a lot of things we didn't, and we had some narrow escapes.

Then one day Steve burnt the wrong guy, badly. We left town in a hurry, in the middle of the night.

We bummed round the middle part of the country for a few months, pulling pocket money jobs here and there, and we ended up back where we started. It was dumb, but people do it. Stay in one place and you can watch them keep making return trips. We didn't even go to a different end of town, just a different neighborhood in the same part.

Steve figured things had cooled off enough to be safe by then, and I guessed he was right. The first thing he did was send me to the library to check

the newspapers. Not only could I read and write, I had no record—no portrait on file, no fingerprints in Washington.

All I could find in the microfilm was that, during the weeks following Steve's stupid and bloody murder (there was more gruesome detail in the days after we left town), several reports had been turned in and suspects questioned. One man was held for several days, but there wasn't enough evidence to try him. A lot of people, from the implications in the newspaper story, seemed to think he had done it. Then nothing more I could find in the next several months.

The library had one of those machines that make a photocopy without the librarian's help, so I copied each story. Then I thought of checking the anniversary issue, and sure enough, there it was on page one of the local section, still unsolved after a year. The picture of Krista Polenski was reduced, but still nightmarish. The mockup of Steve was a little smudgier than the first time.

I checked the next few days' issues. A couple of false alarms, then nothing more.

That had been some months before. It looked safe enough for Steve to show his face, so we started cautiously circulating.

* * *

Once we were settled back in town, things went sour more often than not. We did a jewelry job, and ended up with a nice handful of high quality cut glass. We spent days casing, and most of a night getting into, an empty warehouse. Things like that.

I was beginning to think Steve was really breaking up. Probably, looking back on it, he had been for a while. But now he was doing dumb things. I knew it was time to cut loose before he got me in trouble along with himself, but I didn't have the guts and gumption to do it.

One of the dumb things he did was to pick up the boy for a helper. That was much dumber than I realized at the time. His idea was that we were both a little too hot to do our own gofer work, showing our faces all over town, and there was some truth to that. But he could have tried to get a grownup for the job.

The gofer called himself Tom. I never thought that was his real name. Sometimes he wouldn't answer to it the first call, and he'd delay a fraction of a second before he answered when someone asked him what it was. But that's what he called himself, and therefore what we called him.

Steve never told me how he got hold of Tom. Apparently the kid just sort of attached himself

to him one day, and this fed his ego, so he kept him around. It was like Tom was a kind of apprentice crook or hoodlum groupie. He seemed to want to join the firm and work his way up.

More than anything else, I felt sorry for the kid. For one thing, if he just had to run away from home and join the navy, he could've picked a ship that wasn't sinking. Then, too, he took a hell of a lot of crap from Steve. Steve no longer took his temper out on me, but used the kid for a whipping-boy. He would yell at him and abuse him, he hauled off and hit him a couple of times. He would blame him for things he was no way to blame for, except sometimes following wrong instructions from Steve.

And he didn't really pay the kid. He'd give him just enough for expenses when he sent him on an errand, or maybe just a little short of enough. Tom got a tip once in a while, but he never knew when or how much it would be. I began to realize consciously then—though I'd been responding to it all along—what a power-hungry, sadistic bastard Steve was.

I knew the kid went hungry sometimes—Steve expected him to be on twenty-four-hour call, but more often than not didn't feed him while he hung around

waiting for orders. It got so I'd order more than I wanted when we sent him out for food, then one way or another see that he got some out of my share, without setting it up so Steve could make an issue of it. When I had any cash of my own, I'd slip him a few dollars for walking-around money.

I didn't really like Tom, any more than I disliked him. It was like the kid lived behind a thick glass wall—he was physically present, but somehow he wasn't really there. He made me uneasy, because I couldn't see what was going on in his head and because, more unconsciously than consciously, I knew Steve's ship was sinking and I had no idea how this boy was going to jump when it was time to man the lifeboats. He'd heard a lot of stuff, especially when Steve was drunk, and he could be a danger to us. I was afraid Steve might take it into his head to wipe him out when things got scary. With me there, maybe.

Tom *looked* weird, too. He looked—I can't think of any clearer way to say it than this—sort of underdeveloped for his age. He didn't look like he'd started shaving, and his voice was sort of husky, like it was still changing and he held it under control for fear it would break on him. He seemed all

around maybe early teens, but something about him was much older than that, a kind of case-hardened seriousness. He never smiled. He was slight, not to say scrawny, and maybe five foot six tops. He had dark eyes, and something about them looked a hundred years old, as if they'd seen too much, starting too early.

I figured he only had one set of clothes. I never saw him in anything but camouflage fatigues and heavy clodhopper shoes with thick socks, some kind of T-shirt under the camouflage jacket. It was always about three sizes too big for him, the T-shirt was, with some kind of design or slogan on it. I guess he did change his shirts and underwear and socks—he never smelled.

He wore his hair in a weird variation of the fads that have been going around on and off since the sixties—short bangs in front, long loose sideburns and ducktails, and almost a crewcut on the top and behind the ears. It looked like he cut it himself, which was all he could afford anyhow. If he hadn't looked so damned serious, you'd've laughed at him. Steve did sometimes, and the kid just stood there and took it.

Sometimes I wondered if something was going on between them, but it seemed more

credible than possible. It had been a long time between women for Steve and me both, no real opportunity for anything personal and no cash for anything safe to buy. I wasn't completely sure I wasn't looking lustfully at the boy myself, though that's not the way I swing.

I could imagine Steve, in his selfish sadism, making a catamite out of the kid—he had a kind of pretty-boy look to him, under the weird getup—but the way we were living, holed up most of the time, there just wasn't that much private opportunity. When anybody unzipped a zipper in that apartment, everybody heard it.

I saw what Steve was getting out of the situation. I kept wondering what Tom was getting out of it.

It was along about then that Steve pulled a real dumb one. He lined up a job with a couple of other guys, the three of them working inside and me as driver.

I never figured out all the details, but in general terms what happened was that Steve botched the job and set off a silent alarm—the kind that rings at the police station but not at the job site. He took off with the loot, leaving the other two guys to fend for themselves, when the cops showed up.

All I knew at the time was that I heard a lot of yelling from the far end of the building, then shots aimed in my direction, then Steve came running—two guys about a hundred feet behind him—jumped in, and told me to take off. I took off, not knowing the guys behind Steve weren't the cops.

We were out of sight before the first cop car started rolling. I went to our apartment the long way around anyhow, and when we got there, Tom, as usual when we went out on a job, was waiting impassively for us.

Steve gave him the news, and he offered to guide us to a vacant furnished house with an open back door. Just in case somebody came looking for us.

The house was cold. The water was on, but no electric, which we couldn't have used anyhow. We left Steve there—he was hotter than I was—and I dropped Tom off a couple of blocks from our old place to pick up blankets and food if it looked safe. I came back by fifteen minutes later and collected him along with the bundles at the mouth of a nearby alley. Steve was in a foul mood when we got back. Tom and I made another trip out for some booze to calm him down, then I dropped Tom off to deliver it while I went to abandon the car a couple of

miles away. By the time I got back Steve was rolled up in a blanket, snoring his head off, and Tom was just sitting there on the floor with his back resting against the wall. I didn't see the bruise on his face till he sneaked in with the paper next morning.

Nothing in the paper. It was too late when it happened, we figured, and it might not be a big enough job even to get mentioned. After a while I dared Steve's wrath to ask him if he wanted to send a message by the boy. He just got surly and said no. I had no idea how much the take was—he kept it on him—but I figured he was planning to cross them and keep it all. Which he was.

We did make the papers a couple of days later. There was an old portrait of Steve from the mug file, with his full name. The one they caught spilled it all. There was a brief description of me, but not enough to hang me on. Apparently the one that squealed was out to get Steve and was protecting his partner. For good enough reasons, I figured. Steve made life hell for us both for a couple of days.

I slowly dared to ask Steve if he wanted me to dig up a car to get out of town and he said, no, he had a couple of scores to settle.

So there we were, with Steve getting less rational every day, waiting.

That last evening Tom came in the back door at dusk. Steve thought someone had been watching the place, and had told the kid not to show up in daylight, but nonetheless gave him holy hell for taking so long. I was afraid he was going to hit him again.

The kid just stayed there and took it. As I did. I didn't even try to come to his defense, and this rubbed me the wrong way with nobody but myself to blame.

We wolfed the food down. Steve had three beers, I had two, and Tom was still nursing his first one when Steve sent him out for more. For a while I had wondered what the boy used for I.D. I finally discovered that he transferred it to a soft drink carton before checking it out.

Steve was getting sloppier and sloppier, and the kid was still nursing the same luke-warm half-beer along. The only conversation was Steve's bitching about how the world was treating him. Besides being bored as hell, I kept seeing more of myself in Steve than I wanted to, so I wandered into the living room and picked up his grubby solitaire deck. Just

enough light came in from a mercury lamp next door to see the cards, though you had to watch the colors closely.

After losing a few, I decided to kick off my shoes and stretch out on the sofa. The food and beer had made me drowsy, the solitaire and the mumbling and grumbling from the kitchen had me bored to death. Once in a while Steve would clatter a beer can, but not loud enough to keep me from dozing off.

I had no idea how long I'd slept, but I woke very quickly, all alert, with the feeling that something needed checking out.

The house was dead quiet. I got up in my sock feet and looked into the kitchen, expecting maybe to see Steve passed out in his chair and Tom obediently snoozing, back against the wall like a Mexican sentry. There was no one there. The house gave me an eerie feeling, neighborhood lights coming in through the mostly uncurtained windows interspersed with dark shadows, and no sign of life.

The bedroom door was pushed to but not shut. I thought I heard Steve's sloppy breathing but wasn't sure.

Cautiously and silently I pushed the door open. If something *was* going on between them I sure didn't want to intrude, but I felt I had to check

out my worried feeling.

There was a lump on the bed I took to be Steve. Tom was just standing there at the foot of the bed, stock-still. All I could see in the dim light from the window was his white face and a white hand, with the glint of a knife blade showing.

I don't know how long I stood there watching him. I know part of me wanted to see the boy shove that knife deep into Steve, scary as the whole idea was. Another part of me said I had to stop it. So I just stood there paralyzed, for what felt like two minutes. And all that time the kid didn't move a muscle. We must have looked like one of those gory scenes in a wax museum.

Finally I came to my senses and cautiously walked over to where Tom was standing. For some reason it never occurred to me to be afraid he'd turn on me with the knife. I stood there a minute, sure he knew I was there, and then slowly reached over and pulled the knife out of his thin hand. He still stood there like a wax figure.

I folded the knife, put it in my pocket, put an arm on his bony shoulder, and steered him to the living room, pulling the bedroom door shut behind us. I led him to where the mercury lamp was shining in the window, to get a better look at his

face. I guess to see if he'd finally gone off the deep end.

He stayed still, right where I'd put him, keeping up the waxworks feeling. But under the stillness there was excitement in his eyes and in the sound of his breathing. I thought I could even hear his heart beating in the silent room. And somehow I was very calm and clearheaded. And a vague thought was beginning to form in my head.

"You don't look very good, kid," I told him. "Have you got a fever?" I put my hand on his forehead, which was sweaty but not hot. Not that I'd expected it to be. As I took my hand away I pushed his forelock back and saw the smooth curve of his hairline.

I took his hand and felt his pulse. It was rapid, strong, and regular. And as I'd suspected, the ring finger was the same length as the index. "You don't have a heart problem, do you?" He tried to shrink away as I put my palm on his chest under the camouflage jacket.

There wasn't much there, but it was enough to tell, and now she knew I knew.

Then the look of fear and horror on her face, with her hair off her forehead. I matched her with another image in my head, and I was more shocked than she was.

"My God! Krista Polenski!" I didn't even know till then that I remembered her name.

She bit her lip and slipped the spotted jacket off. By the time I realized what was going on she'd pulled the T-shirt over her head and was working on the buckle of the web belt, tears running down the one cheek I could see in the side light.

Whether she meant to buy me off with her frail young body or just distract me, I didn't know. I was tempted. It had been a long time, and I was horny as a tom tiger in the springtime.

She dropped the bulky pants to the floor with a clatter of the buckle and hesitantly reached her thumbs under the elastic of her boy's jockey shorts. Quickly—more to stop myself than to stop her—I bent down, pulled the fatigue pants back up, and tightened the belt around her thin waist.

"For God's sake, child, keep your shirt on," I growled. I didn't see the pun till I heard myself say it. I handed her the T-shirt and stood there tantalizing myself as she put it on, chest heaving from the excitement and her little nipples, tannish in the blue mercury light and not much bigger than a man's, bobbing up and down as she worked the shirt over her arms and head.

She loosened the belt a little, tucked the shirttail in, and started talking as if she were resuming an interrupted conversation.

"You were with him." Just a flat statement, the accusation there but no dramatics with it.

"Shh. Keep your voice down. God knows we don't need *him* in here right now."

She shook her head as if to clear away a pesky fly. "Not with two sleeping pills in his beer." Then she repeated: "You were with him."

"I was with him. I didn't know what he was doing. I thought he went to get some money from a friend. I had no idea he even had a gun." I was talking fast, making excuses, even if the excuses happened to be true.

"But you heard the shots."

"I didn't make the connection. I didn't know till the next day."

She went on. It was like somewhere between *This Is Your Life* and Judgment Day. She was reading me the facts out of the little book in her head. "But then you knew, and you didn't turn him in. After you knew he killed Mom and Dad." I could hear, now, the tears she was fighting back.

I hesitated. I was getting tired of my own damned excuses. And, somehow, I couldn't

lie to this kid. "No, I didn't turn him in. I didn't have the guts to."

Hint of a smile on her face. I kept feeling like she was holding a gun on me, though I had her only weapon in my pocket.

"At least you admit that now."

I nodded, meaning yes, I admit it.

She went on. "I want two things. I want him out of the world I live in. And I want compensation. The three thousand dollars he stole—that was to keep me in college till I could get a scholarship—and the home they were going to give me till I was on my own."

Three grand. I'd dribbled nearly that much away in a single evening. I realized how big it might look to a small shopkeeper with a daughter ready to start college.

She'd said what she had to say, and I didn't have any good answer. We both stood there silent. Finally I turned and walked to the bedroom.

I pulled the knife out of my pocket, pushed the stud on the handle. The blade clicked into place and I walked up to where Steve, on his back now, was snoring his swinish drunken snore. I carefully felt with my fingers, next to his breastbone, for the space between his ribs. I brought the tip of the blade up to him, and my hand wouldn't

move any farther. Then I thought of the three grand he got when he murdered Krista's parents and never told me he had. My hand still wouldn't move.

I must have stood there a full minute, the knife trembling a fine rapid tremble in my hand a quarter inch from his grubby undershirt. Finally I gave up in disgust, folded the knife, and walked out.

Back in the living room, I handed the knife to Krista. "Here. I didn't have the guts to. You have the right to. I hope you won't. There's other ways."

"Call the cops?" I could hear the sneer in her voice. "They'd never prove the murder. How long would he stay in for the robberies? Four or five years?"

Before I could stop it, it spilled out. "I could testify."

If she was as surprised as I was, she showed it less than I felt it. "Do you have the guts to do that?"

After a long think, I answered slowly. "No. I don't have the guts to turn myself in for a mandatory twenty-five years. You could turn me in. Maybe I could get a reduced sentence, work out a plea bargain thing. I don't think I could do it myself."

I got an odd illusion, so strong that I had to look and see what was real and what was imagi-

nary. The invisible gun she was holding on me just disappeared, and her hand was at her side. As it had been all along.

"Maybe it's not guts," she said. "Maybe you're just not a killer. I have plenty of guts, and I still couldn't do it."

As we left the house, Krista said, "You're going to get an honest job and work my way through college. That's a four year sentence, anyhow." No smile, no sarcasm. Just facts.

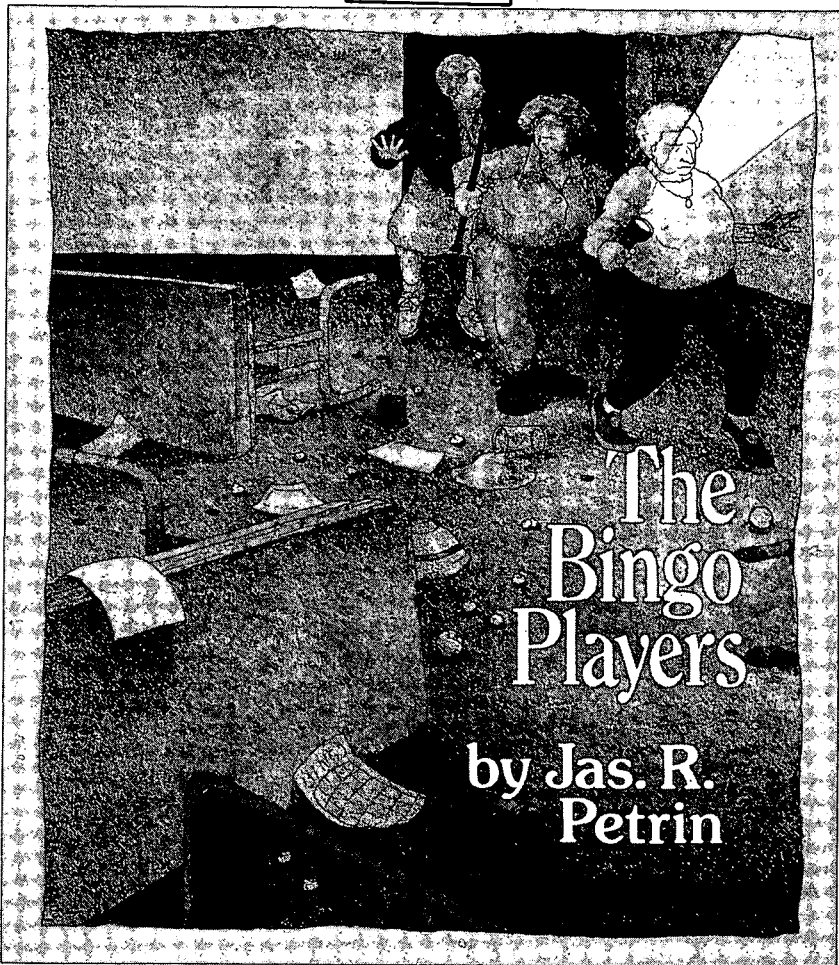
I made a couple of phone calls before we headed south, away from Steve and from the whole past and all the trash in it. Whether they ever caught him, I don't know. I thought of calling the cops myself, just in case, but now that we were away from him, I didn't really care that much. He was already on the last leg of a self-destruct course, and I thought Krista saw it that way, too.

I'm pumping gas now, working Krista's way through college. I'm taking a course in

small business management myself, on my night off. She has a class the same night. We eat out together—at McDonald's—on the way to school that night. Other nights she has supper in the oven for me, if she has an early class the next day, or stays up to feed me if she doesn't. I get her breakfast and pack her lunch for her.

The other night I stopped a holdup man. Broke his wrist with a big crescent wrench as he was pulling his gun. I had him pegged for what he was before he got out of his car. I know the type very well. I got a little letter from the chief of police. It's sort of Mickey Mouse, but I admit I'm proud of it.

My boss is promoting me to day shift soon. I'll miss my regulars, but there'll be others in the daytime. If he can't talk the Independent Merchants' Association into giving me a five hundred dollar reward, he'll give me half of what was in the till that night. Not much, but it makes a difference right now.



“Well, maybe you do know something about it, but I know something about the darn game, too, and I’m here to tell you that nobody—*nobody!*—wins the full house four times

straight in a row. Not without jiggery-pokery. It’s against the human law. I’m just wild!”

“No good whining about it.”

“I’m *not* whining. I’m *com-plain-ing*.”

“Hmphh,” said Mrs. Pebble-

ridge, "same difference."

It was a way of working fresh anger out of their systems: gulping hot tea in the back of Mrs. Dulcie's Shopper's Delite gift store, rinsing away the bitter baggage of the week. Having just stalked out of the End of Main Legion Hall—Tuesday night bingo, nine card sheet for a dollar—in a unified protest, they were swapping complaints, and Mrs. Delmare said she was so mad she couldn't see straight, and Mrs. Pebbleridge said she was just shaking, and Mrs. Dulcie said she'd be thankful if they'd both pour their own tea this time, and put a brownie on their plates, because she was seeing red. Mrs. Dulcie sank down on a chrome chair and fanned herself with a serviette.

"I never seen anything like it. Four full houses in four fast nights? Like playing against a magician—that Henning!"

"A brother calling and a sister winning? And both of them twins? It's not fair and it's not legal," Mrs. Delmare snapped.

"It's legal, all right."

"Taxes are legal, but they shouldn't be."

"Both of them twins, not just one of them," Mrs. Pebbleridge reiterated, as if that were the final straw.

"Twins. You suppose it could be some sort of mental telepathy buzzing between them?"

Mrs. Dulcie asked with suspicion. "I heard of that. I heard even the astronauts use twins for fathoming things out—telepathy—got a bunch locked up someplace, so I suppose it's got to be real, doesn't it?"

"How does it work, anyway, that telepathy?" Mrs. Pebbleridge was inquisitive. Always wondering how things worked. She was the only one they knew of who could take a Cuisinart apart and put it back together with no parts left over. Gifted.

"Telepathy? It's some kind of electrons," Mrs. Dulcie informed her. "Watts, volts, amps—those things that live in the wires. Ohms. Some sort of electrical power that zaps out from head to head. I saw a sketch of it once. Waggly lines."

Mrs. Pebbleridge looked interested. "Lines? And they can fathom you out with them? Where'd you see that?"

"In an encyclopedia somewhere, or in a comic book."

"Don't it need no antenna?"

"No. It just zaps. Straight across the air from one giant brain to another. Waggly lines. Zzzt! Like that."

"Well, you can forget it then," Winona Delmare declared. They looked at her. "Them two don't have even a regular-sized brain to put between them, never mind a giant one."

The twins under discussion were the Vanderveers, recently

returned after a ten year hiatus. Local terrors in their younger years. A brother and sister act, as Winona Delmare put it, back to play the town after a world tour; Brother Dan and Sister Fan—two shadows on the beach of life. Brother Dan had wangled the job somehow (he had a brother-in-law) of calling the numbers at the bingo, and Sister Fan, sitting in the crowd night after night, kept right on managing to win the biggest prizes like there was no tomorrow. Never a small prize; always a big one. Folks grumbled, but nobody said anything. Not officially. After all, there was nothing illegal going on. Was there . . . ?

"Those two, coming back here with their twin brains all pumped and lubricated, must of brought two suitcases full of voodoo magic along with them," Winona said, "it's the only explanation. Look at the weather." She pointed indignantly at the wall, and they all turned as if they could see right through it. "Ever seen such drought? Whole damn marsh shriveling away. Fish learning to walk soon. Ducks growing humps like camels."

"That'd probably be the chemicals," said Mrs. Pebble-ridge, who was environmentally aware.

"Now, girls, don't start reaching," Mrs. Dulcie said.

"If we are, it's because there's things lying all around them two ripe for the reaching. Nasty things. Bad. Things gone wrong. Friday they arrived, Arnason's truck went missing, right? Tell me I'm not right. Vanished like a sock in a laundromat. Never seen since. And if that's not enough, on that very same day—"

"We know, we know," Mrs. Dulcie put in hurriedly. "We know what you're going to say."

And they did. They could read it in her face when Winona Delmare fired herself up to start back in on the body at the crossroads. In fairness, everyone discussed it. It was, after all, an actual homegrown End of Main mystery that you could run through your mind and ponder over, almost as good as something from *Murder, She Wrote*. Officially, it hadn't happened. There was no body. When the police went roaring out to the crossroads at midnight to investigate, after the doc and his wife almost broke down the police station door to report it, they'd found nothing at all. At least, so they had said. But who were you going to believe? A cop? Or your family doctor?

And the doc said he'd seen a Dodge truck—the same type of truck Arnason had lost—lurking in the vicinity.

So people started speculating.

No one could say who the dead man might have been. Nobody local was missing. But the doc's wife said he had been young and dark-haired and had an earring in his ear.

"That's the clue to it," Winona said for the hundredth time, but with a twist to her voice as if she'd only just thought of it, "that earring."

Her two companions raised their cups to their lips, looked inscrutable, tried not to let their exasperation show. They had heard Winona's theory countless times, had given up trying to derail her when she started in on it, knew they couldn't even shunt her onto a siding. Father Crole, of St. Joseph's Church, said Winona was the only argument he knew of against the notion of free will: "You see the light switch on in her eyes when she starts, and nothing on God's green earth can stop her, not even when you haul on her sleeve and yell, **YOU ALREADY TOLD ME!**, and if that's free will, I'm a Mormon."

And Father Crole, as they all knew, was a Catholic.

"There's water involved," Winona said. "Mark my words. You all know what an earring on a man means. Means there's been a sinking. Means you should go look for something to do with water. Probably—" as usual she paused here for the-

atrical emphasis "—something like a *pirate!*"

Tonight Mrs. Dulcie felt compelled to put down her cup and say something. She knew it might possibly make Winona Delmare even hotter, like blowing on a fire, but a person could only take so much.

"For Pete's sake, Winona! Pirate! There's nothing odd about a young man wearing an earring nowadays. I told you before, it's the style. Matter of fact, I've been thinking to order up a crate to sell, divide each pair in half, double my money. You must think half the young men from here to Fargo are fugitives from the Spanish Main, and if *that's* true, then the only pirates left down there are the ones running the hotels and the boat rentals. Besides, this is End of Main, darn near the geographical center of the whole damn solid universe, you couldn't get no farther away from an ocean if you had *maps*."

"Charts," Mrs. Pebblerridge corrected her.

Winona glared across the table at them, with slightly lowered eyelids, as if she were a preacher being forced to defend a difficult doctrine to a pair of especially incorrigible heretics.

"I didn't say 'ocean,' I said 'water.' And I didn't say sailor or pirate, I said something *like* them. And I meant *any* kind of water—salt water, fresh water,

cold water, hot water . . .”

“Hot water won’t do *that* pirate no good,” observed Mrs. Pebbleridge. “Time they get him to home port, he’ll be colder than tuna in the can.”

Winona huffed.

“So what do we do about them Vanderveers?” Mrs. Dulcie wanted to know, piloting the conversation back to solid ground.

“What do *we* do about them?” asked Mrs. Pebbleridge. “*We*? Well, *I* can’t do anything about them, that’s for sure. Not with me sitting on the Parent-Teacher Advisory. It’s politics.”

“Well, don’t go looking at me,” returned Mrs. Dulcie heatedly. “I got my Shopper’s Delite to think about, don’t I? The Vanderveers are still customers, even if they are crooks. I can’t have it get around that soon as you’re a Shopper’s Delite customer you got to start watching for the hatchet in your back.”

“Anyways, they’d fathom us out,” Mrs. Pebbleridge said. “That telepathy.”

Winona Delmare measured both of them down the length of her aquiline nose. Snorting, she made the sort of face one might make getting wind of a powerful scent.

“Right,” she said. “Ri-i-i-ight. Now I see how the cordwood is stacked. The two of you crowding in behind me, elbows out,

pushing. Wanting *me* to take the first step onto the ice. That’s fine. Just fine. I won’t hold back. I know what duty is. I know when I got to take and do a thing by myself, when my own best friends won’t help me—”

“Winona!”

“Don’t start Winona-ing. You both know I’m right, the pair of you.” She groped for her bag; tucked it stiffly under her arm. “Just remember who to thank when you start back to winning the full houses again. And count me in for ten percent. I’ll deserve it, need it for my hospital bills, battling two psychoelectric criminals all on my own—”

“Winona—”

“—going up against a mind-bender and -benderess alone. But I won’t shirk. Just give me a ordinary ‘thanks-a-lot’ when I’m done, that’s all. If I survive, that is. If they don’t fry my brain with their head waves, those waggly lines. Just a ‘thank-you-kindly.’ Not a heck of a lot to ask for taking on a pair of tele-pathetics by myself.” She sniffed. “Prob’ly too late already. Prob’ly already started in on me. Get home and find my milk turned sour, my garden killed off brown, my cat flattened out like a calico rug. After that, grey hairs—” she patted her bouff “—and worse.”

“Listen to us, Winona—”

“Think I don’t know what I’m

talking about? I *know* what I'm talking about. I seen that Uri Geller on TV once, that psychopathognomonic-phenomenal—

"That who-what?"

"You heard me. Remember what he could do? And there's *two* Vanderveers. Heck, I could be stopped like a watch. Or bent like a spoon—how would I play bingo then? Sit on a plate? But still, I guess I got to take them on all alone." She held her hand next to her hair; static crackled, and unstuck filaments of hair lifted magically. "See," she announced, "they're at it already."

"Winona—"

"Nope. I'm outta here."

She stood up, hoisted her bag, stomped out of the room, and a moment later they heard the big front door bang behind her.

"Good grief," said Mrs. Dulcie.

"You can say that again," said Mrs. Pebbleridge.

"It's not like we don't do our share."

"We do plenty."

"She'll spread this all around the town, you know."

"She's spreading it now."

They stayed put for a minute, then leaped up together.

"Call her back! Quick!"

A light burned in a shack. It had been how it had to be. You couldn't think. You had to move

fast. Leave no trace. That's how it was when a world you'd built up precariously—untruths for pillars, exaggerations for beams—gave itself a shake and came down on you. He who hesitates . . . and all that.

But it hadn't been planned to happen. Losing control, that was *never* the plan. But how could you figure this business?

Dan the Man Vanderveer had gotten mad. That was all. The way he'd gotten mad so often before in this town, back when he was a kid. And so the pry bar in his hand had come alive and gone up and over, outward and down, all without the requirement of his own conscious decision.

Leave no trace . . .

He'd almost slipped up there. Panicked. Took off too fast. But he'd got himself in hand right away and gone back, hadn't he? And though by that time the doc had already spotted and reported the body, *and* the stolen truck, the police hadn't believed him (the doc was known to drink), and things had been all nice and tidy when they finally wailed up to the scene.

Bundling the weasel into the cab of the stolen truck, running both truck and motorcycle into the river with hardly a splash—he'd done all that slick as you please. Even remembered to open the windows to make sure the air got out. Still,

the truck had drifted a bit, swung out a little downstream. But it had gone under quick enough. He'd stuck around long enough to make sure of that.

Then he'd scuttled home, crosscountry, cursing.

No, the plan had been good. Nothing wrong with the plan. People would let you down, you had to watch, but the plan . . . well!

Six old bingo-type one-armed slot machines. Professionally fiddled. Two thousand apiece, and he could have turned them over easy to someone he knew in the city for four. Short term profit of six-times-two-equals-twelve thousand dollars. Where could you find money like that?

Six fiddled machines. But he'd had to steal a truck to haul them in, his minivan was too small, and he'd had to borrow the faith money of twelve hundred down, which he'd passed on to the weasel so that he and his weasely friends could stiff him for it. Now he had no machines, no profit—and worst of all, no borrowed faith money.

And all of this, in any business, meant *ouch*!

He closed his eyes. Somewhere in the Far East there was a little hotel room for him. He knew it. Little bamboo stalls under a little window where the sun gentled the shadows across little thatched roofs. A little bar where an old woman in black

trousers served rice liquor that was bracing and cheap. A little enclave of peace . . .

But his partner and twin sister, the Other Side of the Mirror, as he called her, had other ideas—sometimes he felt she was controlling his mind. And he knew that if he defied her she'd string him up like an Oriental paper lantern.

Hell had no fury like her.

So he'd gone along with her solution, though it was risky. Work the old scam a little harder—the palmed-ball bingo scam that they'd worked all across the country. Squeeze it for enough to repay what they owed, before someone at the Legion got wise. The police were satisfied there had been no body at the crossroads. They'd never find the motorcycle, it was too small and he'd sunk it a long way from the truck. As for the truck, well, if somebody reported a submerged truck, the cops would simply think that the driver had stolen it, gone on a joyride, lost control by the river, hit his head, and . . .

And suddenly Dan the Man remembered something.

The truck.

He had forgotten to make sure that the key was in the ignition and that the ignition was switched on. All he'd done was stick the key into the dead man's pocket . . . At least he remembered sticking it into

some pocket . . . Hell, a major chunk of that evening was still a blank; he must have been more rattled than he'd thought.

This was not good. Not good at all. No-sirree-Bob-on-a-borrowed-bicycle. He stood bolt upright. With a shiver of trepidation, he locked up the battered desk in the shed he and his sister were renting—their “ware-house” that now would have no wares—and switched off the light and went worriedly out to face the Other Side of the Mirror.

“‘S sure you’re not just after the reward?”
“Any reward, Winona, you keep it. Me and Mrs. Pebbleridge only want to help.”

“Well. Okay. We all pitch in and catch those Vanderveers, and I keep any reward money. I guess that’s fair.”

“More than fair. Now, how do we go about it?”

Winona Delmare spelled out her idea.

Mrs. Dulcie was dubious.

“So, Winona, that’s the long and the short of it, then? Your master plan? Just to nip in there, the Sunday night after the Saturday night game, and check out those winning bingo balls, those card sheets, that . . . that thingamabob—whatchamacallit—gearwhistle—whogummy—oh, you know,

that air machine contraption? And if that stuff’s all right, nothing wrong with it, then we know for sure there’s been some long-distance telepathizing going on—throwing their minds around?”

“I wish I could throw my mind around,” said Mrs. Pebbleridge.

“Huh,” said Winona. “Throw a feather?”

“I don’t like it,” Mrs. Pebbleridge went on, looking worried. “Waggly lines. I dreamed all night about them. Suppose the twins fathom us out? And even if they don’t, break and enter is a crime. Suppose we get caught? Suppose old Epp, the town watchman, comes flying in at us, shooting first and asking questions later?”

“Epp fly?” Winona snorted. “A barn might fly, not Epp. And besides, he doesn’t have a gun. If there’s ever anything loaded where he is, it’s him.” And as if she realized her friends still weren’t convinced, she added the kicker: “You want to get back to winning the full house once in a while, don’t you?”

That lit a fire in their eyes. And a few minutes later they were in agreement that on the coming Sunday, soon after midnight, one day after the game, they would strike. Winona even suggested a name for them—the Bingo Lady Avengers.

“I like it! We could wear

caples!" cried Mrs. Pebbleridge, her eyes sparkling.

"And leap tall buildings?" Mrs. Dulcie challenged. "Huh! Isn't one of us could leap a fire-plug if they laid it dead on its side. Bluejeans is what I'm wearing. And sneakers. Something comfortable for jail."

"Oh, stop it. We'll waltz clean through that place once I figure out how to get us in the door," Winona promised.

Wild Luba Moony moved at full gallop through the night.

Fences, front porches, and hedges slipped by. Wind streamed her hair back, the sidewalk swept up and under, and she sucked in big draughts of cool summer darkness that burned in her lungs like an invigorating drug. She loved to run. Ran all the time. At home she crossed rooms at a trot, like that TV lady, Edith Bunker. Energy. That's what it was. Plenty of energy. So much that she sometimes felt she could gallop across the world with it.

Only she didn't. She stayed put. She did her galloping right here in the Interlake, where galloping was safe.

Wild Luba had retained her childhood habit of lightly slapping her own flank when she ran, which, with the thud of her feet, produced a very convincing horse-in-a-hurry sound.

People in End of Main, or in WestBrook, would hear a galloping past their house, a canter of fast feet, and know right away that Wild Luba Moony was on the move. Wild Luba would run all night.

She rounded the corner of Burton Street, onto Seventh, leaving the glowing fluorescent reef of downtown lights, and ran on into the deeper shadows and silences of the town.

She saw the light go out in the little shed that stood at the back of Schmidt's lot, and when she saw that she faltered.

The old Schmidt shed. She didn't like that place. Slumped in the brown grass like an ancient but undead animal, all weathered, mud-battened beams. The shed had not had an occupant for as long as she could remember, but it had one now. A new man in town. A man with a tumbling forelock and shadowy beard. A man who didn't smile. A man who reminded her of the bad old days when a kid with a forelock like that had mercilessly teased her; a kid who'd had a twin, she remembered vaguely, a sister that was every bit as nasty . . .

She crossed to the far side of the street and galloped on.

"You did what?"
Fan was furious. Livid. She came across the

kitchen at him like an avenging fury. He tried to sit still without flinching and continue to fork his fried eggs and beans into his mouth, but he felt her rage at his elbow; he could almost hear the sparks of it pop and crackle in the air.

"I forgot to make sure the ignition was on," he said again.

She sighed like a high pressure leak.

"You didn't get the machines, you didn't get our money back, you didn't get us a thing—and now you say you didn't even take proper care of the mess you made?"

Dan jumped up. Now he was angry, too. "I hit him! I didn't mean to kill him, but I did. Want me to climb on the roof and shout it? I forgot *one thing*. But it's done, and now we got to think about what we're going to do next and get on with it. I say we head east—far, far east."

He sat down, trembling, and began to eat again. Fan bent over him, lowered her head until it was level with his plate, and husked into his face: "I've got a good idea what to do next, and it isn't something you'd find pleasant, I assure you."

He thrust the handle of his steak knife at her, pulled open his shirt at the throat, and offered her a target of matted hair.

"Do it. Go ahead. If it'll make you feel better."

She sat down. She looked suddenly haggard and tired.

"I knew when we drove back into this town that we were making a mistake. Should at least of taken a different road. Coming in on that Bridge to Nowhere—it was an omen."

The Bridge to Nowhere was a new bridge, with clearance enough to let the *QE2* pass under it, a bridge nobody used because it didn't lead anywhere. A puzzlement to strangers until they learned that one end of it bore a relationship to some land owned by a politician.

"I can't believe you did this to us. You could at least have checked everything before you—" She banged her fist down. "You got to go back, that's what, Sunday evening, when there's no bingo, and dive down to that truck and go through that man's pockets and find that key and stick it in that ignition switch where it belongs, and turn it on, on, *on!*"

Dan Vanderveer was incensed. Had she any idea what she was asking? Again he jumped up, and this time he threw his plate across the room. It struck the sink and shattered. Food flew everywhere. Beans stuck to the wallpaper in brown lumps; egg yolk oozed down the cupboard doors.

"I'm *not* going back to that truck. I'm *not* diving on it, I'm *not* going through the pockets

of no waterlogged dead man."

Fan looked weary. She got up heavily, rinsed out a dishcloth in the sink, and began to swab away at the mess he'd just made, as if flying dinner plates, in her experience, were the most common event in the world.

"Yes, you are," she said softly, and with solid, unshakable conviction. "Yes, you are."

Dan the Man Vanderveer wasn't the only one in End of Main that Saturday evening to jump into the air and throw something; there was a second unscheduled launch, and Vanderveer himself was a witness to it. In fact, he was a target. It came just hours after his own plate hit the wall, at the End of Main Legion Hall, sixty seconds past the instant Fan Vanderveer shouted, "Bingo!" (It was a full house game, first prize two hundred dollars and a free hamburger plate—your choice of beverage—at the Netley.)

At first nobody moved. They just sat there, stupefied. It was Edith Janzen who got them going. She came slowly up—like she was on hydraulics, is how Al of Al's Gas-O-Hol put it (and his wife asked him what kind of drug *that* was)—till she was bolt upright; then she threw a white-knuckled fistful of card dabbers through the air. They rattled over the tables, dabbing

everything. Dejected faces glanced up all over the room.

"That Mrs. Janzen," whispered Winona Delmare. "She's played more cards this week than a river boat gambler. Hasn't won a nickel in over a month."

"The old fool," Mrs. Dulcie complained, "she's going to go and spoil our whole damn plan."

"What can we do about it?" Mrs. Pebbleridge asked. "Just look at her! She's sizzling. A bomb in a glass factory. A human bomb waiting to blow up the room, and the Vanderveers just pulled her pin."

It was an apt analogy. With no neck and sloping shoulders, Mrs. Janzen was even shaped like bomb. A B-1 could have slung her into its underbelly and dropped her on the town. A largish woman with the meaty arms of a past-prime pugilist, she bulled her way, seething, between the crowded tables. Chair legs chirped as people made way. Dave and Mona, the Weston bingo champs, watched her go by with their eyebrows up. At Fan Vanderveer's table she stopped. She swayed there on her tiny feet, as if waiting for a formal declaration of war.

Suddenly she pounced.

"Hah!" she said accusingly. "I figured so." She pointed at the table. "You been using a rabbit's foot!"

Fan Vanderveer, a brawny

'woman and' no cream tart herself, scowled back.

"It isn't a turkey leg, sweetheart. What of it?"

"A brown lucky rabbit's foot on a braided cowhide thong is *my* charm to use, always been my charm, everybody knows that, just ask 'em."

Around her, behind her, heads bobbed. It was true. They all knew it.

"I don't have to ask nobody nothing," Ms. Vanderveer said. "And I don't have to sit here and have you standing over me like Godzilla on a toot. So put your firebox out and back off, lady, and sit down before you meet your King Kong a day early."

Mrs. Janzen sucked in her breath so sharply her cheeks caved in. She didn't take to being bullied. She'd been an elementary school teacher for twenty-five years of her life, and she was more than accustomed to doing the bullying, thank you. Her mouth hung open and her speech came in a short, wheezy gasp.

"What—what did you say?"

"You heard me, sister. Shake the gravel out of your ears. Put your rig in reverse, back off a block or two, and park that caboose of yours somewhere else. And quit breathing down my cleavage; if I catch a cold from it, I'll sneeze you out the door."

You could see it coming then.

Mrs. Dulcie certainly could, but like everyone else she was an instant too late to do anything about it. As if in stop-action photography, there was Mrs. Janzen reaching, Mrs. Janzen plucking a glass from the table beside her, and, yes, Mrs. Janzen pouring a full, foaming amber stream of Black Label beer over the disbelieving, then startled, then totally outraged face of Ms. Fan Vanderveer.

"Pearl Harbor," Mrs. Dulcie said. "Call the marines."

Pandemonium broke loose.

There was a powder keg of ill feeling in that room. People said later you could smell the sulphur and saltpeter of it. Bingo people knew how to take defeat, but they didn't like to take it all the time, every time, sent home with their good luck charms and their dabbers, licking their wounds forever. An instant after Mrs. Janzen had treated Fan Vanderveer to a Black Label surprise, Mr. Wynnott, a small, clerkish man seated by the cigarette machine, a man who wouldn't say boo to a cat, suddenly snatched up a basket of popcorn and flung it wildly at the head of Dan Vanderveer, watching from the podium. It was a signal. Revolution! The room rose in a wave, beer and popcorn flying in all directions. The Vanderveers bolted like panicked deer for the back room, and Mr. Ro-

bideau, Legion treasurer and police chief at the same time, rushed at the crowd with his arms up. A hail of dabbers flew at him like a barrage. "Stop it!" he bellowed. "I'm the police!"

The real police came and went. (Robideau didn't count, since he wasn't in uniform, and everybody had a good yell at him.) The twins had escaped out the back door to their minivan at full pelt. During the controlled confusion while the staff wrung their hands over the mess, Winona Delmare nipped into the ladies' room and did some Avenging work there, out of sight.

She came out smiling strangely, collected her fellow Avengers, and they left.

He tried to make her see reason. You didn't just leap into rivers and search sunken vehicles. But he failed to placate her rage, her terrible rage, hot and steaming and mad-dog furious. If she'd ever thought of leaving town, that thought was over now. After the way that mob had treated her? She'd never give them the satisfaction.

Leaving his old minivan heeled hard over on the sloping gravel shoulder, Dan Vanderveer worked his way down the embankment until only the main arch of the Bridge to Nowhere was visible over the brow

of the first bend. Safe enough. The Bridge to Nowhere was just that. Nobody crossed it. He turned his attention to the water.

He'd been a good swimmer, once; a strong one. Dubbed U-Boat by his teenage pals up at Gimli Beach, he would alligator in from twenty yards out and drag some unsuspecting young thing under by the knees. But that had been many years and many beers ago. Since then life had turned serious. Very serious indeed.

He'd left his jeans and T-shirt in the van, and now, with face mask and snorkel strapped tight to his balding head, he guessed he was ready to rock and roll.

He stuck a foot in the river and almost yelled.

Damn, but it was cold!

Uncertainty gripped him. He was no kid any more. No longer the U-Boat. He was forty years old and paunchy. What if he had a massive coronary? What if hypothermia bit deep into his beer hall ballast and scuttled him? What if...

What if he shuffled home empty-handed to the Other Side of the Mirror, and Sister Fan took a foot-long bread knife out of the drawer and lopped some prime cuts off him?

Safer to chance the water.

Clenching his teeth, he strode in. Goose flesh popped up on him like number ten shot.

"Gah!" He sucked in his breath. Reached down, wet his hands, and palmed cold water over himself. "Gah!" Pulled his mask off, spat in it, rinsed it, put it back on again.

Then he dived in.

He found the truck immediately; he was right on top of it. It loomed up so suddenly he almost bashed his head on it. Stroking against the current, he groped for one of the door handles and pulled. They were the lift-up type, and the door came open, and the current took it and held it that way. He caught a quick glimpse of the ignition switch; there was no key in it.

He surfaced, took a couple of rib-stretching breaths, then frog-rolled under again and grabbed hold of the truck. He hauled himself down to the open door.

The water was murky. A blessing. The body was a blurred shape, feet-up under the steering wheel. He didn't want to look at it. He pulled one of the denim-clad legs to him, fumbled and felt at the pockets. The body was heavier than he'd expected, hard to manage.

The back pocket was empty. He managed to turn the front pocket inside out, and a handful of change seesawed through the water. But no key. There were still two pockets left, on the other side of the body.

He surfaced, breathed, dived again.

The corpse was stubborn. Not just heavy but actually fixed somehow in its feet-up position. Head and shoulders wedged under the dashboard. He took a handful of shirt and pulled hard, but the damn thing wouldn't come free.

Surface, breathe, then dive again...

One more try. His lungs ached. He was freezing cold. His hands were so numb he could barely feel the truck with them. But he must succeed this time or go home and be killed by Fan. Deep-sixed by her in a vehicle next to this one, he and this corpse neighbors forever. That would be Fan's style. He pulled himself right inside the cab this time, braced one foot firmly against the dash, took a strong grip on the corpse by one shoulder, and pulled.

Two things happened.

The body came free: that was the good thing. The other thing wasn't so good. When he felt in the corpse's remaining pockets, he found no key in them.

No key.

Panicking all over again, he kicked free and stroked back to the surface. He scrambled, dripping, up the embankment and into his van. He was shaking so badly he could hardly light his cigarette.

No key.

Now when the cops found the truck—and they would find it, sooner or later—they'd know right away foul play was involved. No joyriding auto thief drove himself into a watery grave without a key in the ignition.

No key.

But he was so *sure* he had pushed it into a pocket.

And then suddenly he remembered. It came as clear to him now as if a light had been switched on. He had put the key into a pocket, all right. His *own* pocket. The pocket of the pants he had been wearing. He had been so rattled that night that all his recollections of it were disjointed, like scraps of horror film on a cutting room floor.

It would mean another swim, but he was sure at least now that he could take care of the business properly.

The Bingo Lady Avengers kept their rendezvous. Not at the Legion but on the next corner to it at the end of the block, a table in Robin's Donuts where they could sit over coffee by the window and keep an eye out.

"My fingernail broke," Winona Delmare told them; "those darn Vanderveers."

"What'd you do in that bathroom on Saturday night?" Mrs. Dulcie wanted to know.

"I skulked."

"Skulked and did what?"

"Skulked and popped a window."

"We got to go in a window?"

"*Somebody's* got to go in a window. Think we can just waltz in the door? It's the Avengers' way."

"Why do you have to keep on about people 'waltzing'? I never said nothing about waltzing. I never waltz."

Mrs. Pebbleridge didn't look convinced, either. "I asked it before—aren't we forgetting something? Those twin Vanderveer brains? What if they're fathoming out to us, right now, listening in? What if they get *mad*? Put their powers together and lightning-bolt the restaurant?" She glanced around her. "You never know."

"*You* never know," Mrs. Dulcie agreed.

"They won't fathom us out," Winona Delmare said.

"*Now* you say that. You said they could before."

"Yes, but their brains are too small. I said that before, too."

Mrs. Pebbleridge stared off into space. "I guess, then, the dinosaurs couldn't have had telepathy... they had small brains..."

"They aren't the only ones."

"... small brains that got them suddenly extinctified."

"Fine. Maybe there's hope for Mrs. Dulcie and me."

"What if there's burglar

alarms?" Mrs. Pebbleridge fretted.

"There isn't," Winona assured her.

"What if there's traps?"

"There aren't."

"What if we can't get in?"

"What if we can't get *out*?" It was Mrs. Dulcie interrupting irritably. "That's what we should be worrying about. It's what *I'm* worrying about. Trapped in there, I wouldn't dare show my face come Monday morning. I'd just have to go in hiding. Hiding in there forever. A sort of Phantom of the Legion."

"Bingo night comes, you could drop a candelabra on Fan Vanderveer's head," Mrs. Pebbleridge pointed out.

"You're both worrying about nothing," Winona Delmare said with authority. "There are no candelabras. And we can waltz out the door, once we're on the inside. It's entirely safe. I planned this operation. It's under my total control."

"Glad to hear that," Mrs. Dulcie said, miffed. "For a minute there I thought, breaking into a locked up building, dead of the night, waltzing, and then spying on people that can see through heads like they were glass doorknobs or something, we were taking some sort of risk."

"Pooh. You two worry about everything." Winona suddenly

pointed out the window. "Look! There! That drunken Robideau's finally slurped his way through Saturday's leftovers — the *spillage*, he calls it—and there he is getting into his car. Good grief, look at him. Drunk as the Last Living Lord. There he goes. . . . Nope, that's reverse, chief, put it in drive. . . . Yow! that parking sign! Yikes." She snapped her purse shut, and her eyes glittered dangerously. "Coast is clear, fellow Avengers. Are we ready?"

"I'm ready," Mrs. Pebbleridge murmured, "to take and have a nervous conniption fit."

"I'm ready to jump a fence, running," said Mrs. Dulcie.

"Hold that thought," said Winona, "for the getaway."

She waltzed them out of the restaurant in formation.

Dan the Man sat in the crummy kitchen chair at the crummy kitchen table (budget-minded grouping, folks, blow-out prices!) and waited for his sister to turn around with a handgun or a missile launcher or something and let a hole into him the size of the Main Street underpass. When she did turn around, he sighed inwardly; there was nothing in her hand but the can opener, and he'd be pleased to let her wing that at him.

She did.

He hardly even flinched as it

caromed off the fridge, taking an inch-long chip of enamel out of the door.

"You *find* that key! You find it *now*! You find it if it's the last thing you ever *do*!"

He'd already tried. After sorting through the pockets of his clothes with no success, he'd gone at the minivan, torn the seats, even the ratty rugs, out, searching. Gone back into the house, snapped on every light in the place, combed under seat cushions and into every other conceivable place. Still nothing.

Fan had sat in the kitchen, fuming.

He'd driven over to Seventh Avenue, to the shed they called the warehouse, and gone over its cramped confines with determined and concentrated energies.

Nothing again.

Maybe it was the flying can opener that did it, but he suddenly had another strobelike flash of recall concerning the Terrible Night. A brain wave.

The Legion. The key had to be at the Legion!

He had stopped there to get warm, he remembered, after returning on foot from the river. He had let himself in with his key, changed his clothes in the basement. The dark pants and shirt he'd worn that night were still stuffed in his locker. He told Fan all this, excitedly.

"Well, mister, you get that van started and get us over to that Legion toot-sweet, and the tooter, the ham-damn sweeter, you hear me?"

"Move it left a tad more," Winona directed.

Shoulders together, they woman-handled the trash bin another foot closer to the wall, following Winona Delmare's instructions. It gonged on the cement like a burglar alarm.

"And be quiet."

"We are being quiet."

"And hurry up. We got to get in through that window. Here's the plan." She gathered them to her like a quarterback. "See, how I figure it, one of us climbs and jumps up on this trash bin, pops in that there window, then runs around and opens the damn front door." She drew in her breath and swelled herself. "The skinniest one."

The Champs Chicken House neon across the street lit the three of them in a sickly plasma glow. They appraised each other doubtfully. Three large, full-busted women. There was no skinniest one.

"Hmphh. I guess it don't matter then. You," said Winona to Mrs. Pebbleridge, "you're elected. Jump on up and pop in through that window and open the darn door."

"Me? Why me? I'm on the Parent-Teacher Advisory."

"I'm a parent, and I'm advising you."

"I'm not the skinniest."

"You used to be."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Well . . . you've had the most experience at it. Being skinny, I mean."

"That's ridiculous—"

Mrs. Dulcie broke in. "Come on, dear, you like to *think* you're the skinniest. It'll be mind over matter."

Mrs. Pebbleridge thought it over quickly. "Now's a bad time. Now I got too much water in me. That's it. All filled with water, like a water balloon. See, I got to take these pills . . ."

"Pills full of water? Get up on that bin!"

They humped her up onto the trash bin, lifting one plump elbow each, hoisting, and told her to hurry up and lift the damn window and jump through before Epp the town watchman showed up and started firing his gun, if he had one, in every direction.

The window slid open fine. No problem there. Winona had done her skulking well. Fretfully, Mrs. Pebbleridge eased her head and shoulders in. But halfway into the opening there was a crisis: she got wedged in the casement and stuck fast. The other Avengers pushed and prodded, but only raised thin, muted wails from within. Wi-

nona Delmare and Mrs. Dulcie stood back to survey the problem.

"What a sight," Mrs. Dulcie breathed.

"Those hips."

"Sixty pounds of bacon in a forty pound sack. What now?"

"Well, there's always . . . this . . ."

Winona Delmare reached up. And slapped.

Dan drove along Burton Street toward the Legion, nervously. He didn't care for the idea of entering those premises in the middle of the night, not now, not after what had happened Saturday evening. It was long past midnight on a Monday morning; what if someone drove by and recognized his van?

But Fan was like a cattle driver beside him, goading him on.

"Hurry and don't stop," she said.

When Mrs. Pebbleridge let her fellow Avengers in, ranting and holding her fanny, they found the place still in shambles. Mrs. Dulcie had brought a small pry bar along in case they needed it, and she pointed it at the mess. Some of the clutter had been put right by the serving staff before they left, but the heavy cleaning had been put off for Monday. Pop-

corn crunched underfoot.

"We should go on home and forget this," Mrs. Pebbleridge mumbled timidly, the sound of her own voice seeming to frighten her. "Whatever they were doing to cheat, they won't dare try it again, not after that row."

"No. Not good enough. We got to get the goods on 'em," Winona snapped. "We got to find something so they'll have to give back their winnings so we can have a giant full house jackpot and make up for what we've been through. I'm determined."

"But do you honestly think we're going to find anything? They won't have left anything incriminating. They're not stupid."

"Anybody mean-mouths Edith Janzen to her face doesn't exactly have both oars in the water. And did you see them run when someone called for tar and old feather pillows? They darn near flew out of here. They left clues, all right."

There was a half-open door behind the bar, steps leading down.

"The bingo stuff's kept down there. Mrs. Dulcie, you come down with me. Mrs. Pebbleridge, take this wrench, wait here, and stand guard."

"Guard what?"

"Us, you ninny."

"All by myself? What if they

zero in on me with their brains, fathoming?"

"Well, fathom right back at them. You got a brain, don't you?" And to Mrs. Dulcie she muttered, "Economy size."

Mrs. Dulcie said, "If somebody comes, just scream."

"I'll scream, all right. Take the roof clean off."

They left Mrs. Pebbleridge mumbling to herself and followed their looping flashlight beams down the steps. There were two doors at the bottom. Behind the first one was a furnace, some pails, and a mop. Behind the other . . .

"Hah!" sang out Winona.

. . . was the air-ball machine, the multicolored pads of nine cards each, a box of dabbers—and a single steel locker. Winona immediately pried the air machine open and began to paw through the plastic balls.

"What are you doing?"

"Seeing if they all weigh the same. There was a guy in Chicago or Paris or some place like that filling balls up with water to win the lottery."

"Did he win it?"

"Yep. Then they jailed him."

"Boy. Lucky."

"Hold the light nice and steady. I want to try and get into this locker. Huh, an old Dudley combination lock, same as we used to have in school. I used to open these things with a wink."

"Start winking, then. I'm nervous."

Winona had the locker door sprung in three tries. She grunted. It was jam-packed with clutter. She knelt down, and started going through it. "Hold that light steady! You're flinging it all over the darn place, making me dizzy!"

"Well, *hurry*, then. What's taking so long? You *want* someone to catch us?"

Winona didn't answer, didn't take the time, just pawed through the locker as fast as she could. Things she found puzzled her. What the heck was some of this stuff for anyway? Gloves, old cloth coat, ratty paint-spattered sneakers . . .

"Will you *hurry*, Winona? Might as well go hang a sign on the door. POLICE! FBI! WELCOME! WE'RE IN THE CELLAR. That what you want?"

"Throttle yourself, Mrs. Dulcie, will you?"

Here was a vinyl-backed ledger stuffed with foolscap covered in figures. Calculations . . . but of what? The amounts looked surprisingly like full house prizes. What could it mean?

"Someone coming," Mrs. Pebbleridge's voice echoed down the stairwell. "I can fathom it. Nearly here, getting closer—"

Kiwi shoe polish, black . . .

"—rounding the corner, with guns, this minute—"

Another ledger. Green cloth cover.

Columns of figures and names . . . city addresses . . . a scribbled entry of twelve thousand dollars.

"—out of their car, creeping up on us, closer—"

"For Pete's sake, will you shut her up for half a minute, the blathering fool? I can't go no faster on drugs!"

A cloth bag, closed by a drawstring. Winona had seen it before, at Dan Vanderveer's feet during the games. She opened it. It was filled with numbered balls.

"Gotcha!"

"At the door, now—"

There was a sudden crash from upstairs. Mrs. Dulcie screamed and leaped on Winona Delmare's back, taking them both to the floor. "Cops!" she squealed. "Help me! It's a heart attack!"

"Get up and get off!" Winona had been knocked half into the open maw of the locker, and now as she struggled, she spilled some of the contents out onto the floor.

Then Mrs. Pebbleridge called down to them: "It's only me. I dropped the wrench. My hand got sweaty."

Mrs. Dulcie backed away sheepishly. "Sorry, Winona. Guess I'm a little jumpy—"

"JUMPY? YOU DARN NEAR BROKE MY NECK!"

"I said I was sorry—"

"Everything all right down there?" Mrs. Pebbleridge called worriedly.

"Fine and dandy!" Winona shouted back at her. "Nothing to worry about. Just some nut upstairs yammering, and a mad lunatic woman jumping around down here with a wrecking bar. All fine, if you don't mind the insanity." She handed over the cloth bag. "Think you can hang onto this without leaping through a wall? It's our proof. It goes straight to Chief Robideau—that drunk."

She began tossing the spilled items back into the locker. As she picked up a pair of old trousers, there was a jingle and something small and metallic hit the floor. "What was that? Find it. Shine the light." She fumbled for it. "It's . . . some kind of key."

"Key? What key?" Mrs. Pebbleridge shouted down the stairs.

Winona Delmare picked it up. A car key on a large brass vanity tag, the kind you see at Bargain Harold's by the check-out stand; with a large capital A and an embossed head of some sort of horned goat.

"Key?" Mrs. Pebbleridge shouted.

Mrs. Dulcie got the light aimed again, and Winona hurriedly stuffed the key back into the pants, balled the pants up,

and crammed them into the locker and slammed the door. She snapped the old Dudley lock through its hasp and gave it a spin.

"Now let's waltz on out of here. Before the cops do come."

Dan Vanderveer's key stuttered at the lock, his hand was shaking so bad. Fan gave him the elbow.

"We don't have all night."

He got the key slotted home, turned it, gave the usual heavy pull at the handle, and almost dragged his arm out of its socket.

"Can't you take and unlock a ordinary door, for the love of all that's holy?"

"I *did* unlock it. I turned the key. Unless . . ."

Unless it was already unlocked, and by using the key he had *relocked* it. Let's see, was it twist left to lock and twist right to unlock, or . . .

"Move it!"

He hauled the door open and let them into the hall.

Mrs. Pebbleridge came on quick tippy-toes down the stairs behind her bouncing light, making shrill little noises of terror. Winona hissed at her:

"What is it? What's wrong? Do you have to make that infernal squealing? You sound like a rat in a wringer—"

Her scolding was cut short by Mrs. Pebbleridge's chubby hand

clamping over her face. Mrs. Pebbleridge squeaked, "I looked out the window. Saw Dan and Fan!... in the van!... so I ran!"

Winona and Mrs. Dulcie gave her their full attention, searching her wide-eyed, torchlit face, her trembling Cupid's bow mouth. Mrs. Pebbleridge couldn't speak, just rolled her eyes upward, gesticulating furiously at the floorboards.

Then they heard it. The thud of the big front door slamming shut, the tread of purposeful footsteps overhead.

"What are they doing here at this hour?" Winona hissed.

Mrs. Pebbleridge had no answer.

"The furnace room," Mrs. Dulcie urged, dragging at them.

They hurried down the hall, shut themselves in, and huddled in the dark.

Dodge Ram!

Winona thought about the embossing on the key tag, and her heart took off galloping like Wild Luba Moony leaving the starting gate. Arnason's truck had been a Dodge Ram! Was there a connection? The doc said he'd seen a Dodge near the crossroads. Could it be that the Avengers, trying to get to the bottom of a petty scam, had somehow stumbled onto the crossroads killing? The notion made her blood run hot and then cold.

On the other side of the door voices mumbled, the locker clanked open. Then there came a sudden male rumble of annoyance. A female voice shrilled, footsteps approached swiftly, and the furnace room door flew back.

Light flooded in, and Fan Vanderveer shrieked, "Come on out of there!"

They were trooped-out in a line like three schoolgirls caught raiding a fridge. Fan took the string bag out of Mrs. Dulcie's hand, and threw an acid glance at Brother Dan. We just got to dummy up, Winona told herself. Keep quiet, say nothing. Then Mrs. Pebbleridge exploded into a loud, frenetic jabbering:

"You got to let us go—got to let us leave right now! We know all about you—everything you did—we've been through your locker—got the whole story—it's too late now—the police will get you—we found the *keys!*"

Winona died inside.

Oh, Mrs. Pebbleridge, you and your loose-lipped yapper, now you've done it, with your blab-blab-blabbng and not stopping to use your tiny brain like the dinosaurs had and look what happened to them and now you're going to get us extinctified, too.

The Vanderveer twins were staring angrily at the Bingo Lady Avengers. Brother Dan's mouth opened and shut with a

dry click, Sister Fan's cheek twitched. Then they drew back and put their heads together. Dan stepped forward. He swallowed.

"Since you know so much about it, gone and found the key and everything, it looks like you got to come along with us."

"Come along with you where?" Mrs. Pebblerridge fretted.

Winona Delmare knitted her brows, determined to get to the bottom of things—even if it killed her.

"Might as well tell us, then, what happened that night up at the crossroads."

Vanderveer glanced at his sister, then at his feet.

"Go on and tell," Fan said mockingly. "Satisfy your public. Let them know what a dunce you are. I'll go see if the coast is clear." She went up the stairs.

"I borrowed the Dodge because my own van was too small. See, I went to take a delivery. A guy was supposed to have some machines for me," Dan mumbled as if he were in a confessional. "I'd already paid him part of the money. When he drove up on the motorcycle, I saw he hadn't brought the goods with him like we'd arranged, so I..."

"Hah!" Winona snapped. "He was a pirate." She glanced around at her two friends with a superior air. "So you up and killed him?"

Vanderveer looked pained.

"It wasn't like that. Not exactly, I mean. But, yes, I guess he died, all right."

"You *guess* he died—huh!" scoffed Mrs. Dulcie.

"I had the bar in my hand. I gave him a chance to explain, and he spouted off about the seller wanting more money. I knew it was a squeeze. So I socked him. He fell back, and the bike rolled over on him. I saw his legs weren't moving. Weren't, you know, twitching. I mean, you expect a man's legs to thrash when he's got something like that on top of him. But he wasn't moving at all."

"So you tossed him in the van, drove away fast, and hid him and all the evidence ... where?"

"In the river."

"Hah!—water!" Winona cracked her hands together as if she'd just won a full house. Their predicament was suddenly the furthest thing from her mind. She was positively gloating. "Water. I *said* water. Didn't I? Didn't I say water? Well, then—water. Yes, water. There you go!"

"And what about the bingos?" Mrs. Dulcie wanted to know.

"We were trying to make up the money we'd borrowed—"

"Yeah, but how'd you *win*?"

"Fan takes a special card. Then I palm from this second

set of balls—"he raised the bag "—to make her cards come out. We been caught before. But here it's easy. No one really watches, they're all too busy playing."

Fan came clumping down the stairs.

"All clear. Roundup time. Let's hit the trail with these cows."

"Going where?" Mrs. Dulcie wanted to know.

"Where do you think? A spot nice and lonely. The Bridge to Nowhere. Where the river is deep. Splash. Glug. Worked fine once. Work fine again."

Of course, if you *really* needed a gallop, the time to do it was long after sundown, when magic was out and about, and the place to do it was right down the middle of the solid white line in the middle of the Bridge to Nowhere. No traffic to worry about. At the top of the world. The river below like a broad glass belt with the stars buried in it. You could really gallop then. Nostrils flaring, feet flying—galloping!

Wild Luba anticipated this as she trotted easily north along River Road. Now and then a car rushed by—flash of high beams, red taillights dwindling. On high ground to her left, the houses grew fewer and farther apart; here a darkened bunga-

low, patio the size of a pasture, gas barbecue abandoned, one huge glowing window. A wall of cedars took it away.

Wild Luba Moony trotted on. Soon she would be galloping over the high grey arch of the mid-river span of her very favorite spot.

The Bridge to Nowhere.

They drove out in an abbreviated convoy; Fan up ahead, driving Mrs. Pebbleridge's brown Hyundai; Dan bringing up the rear in his minivan with the Bingo Lady Avengers, wrists safely taped, tucked safely into the cargo compartment. Mrs. Pebbleridge was holding her breath and turning red, and when the other girls asked her why, she let it go with a gasp and said she was bracing herself for the jolt when all her innermost thoughts would be telepâtized out of her in one giant zap. "I'm afraid to think," she admitted, "they might hear me," and she shut up quick and held her breath again.

"Like hearing the sun go down on a vacant lot," Winona sighed.

Soon the van slowed, bounced, and, then stopped. A car door slammed shut close beside them; and they heard Fan Vanderveer's voice address her twin brother.

"Did you see that fool on the road running like a horse? That idiot Luba Moony. I'd give her

a gallop. Gallop her off to the glue factory." She put her head into the van. "All right. Last stop. All you cows out, and into that little rattletrap—get going, move your fannies, now!"

"And then what?" Mrs. Dulcie asked.

"It's not a rattletrap," whimpered Mrs. Pebbleridge. "You just have to pull the choke out."

"A choke in a new car!" Fan Vanderveer sneered. Then she grinned a sly grin at Mrs. Dulcie. "Then what? Then . . . splash!"

"Splash?" Mrs. Pebbleridge said, quivering. Fresh tears tracing wide wet tracks down either side of her creamy face.

Winona spelled it out. "She means she's going to drown us."

Mrs. Pebbleridge's damp eyes flew open. She snapped her head around to look at the river. "No! No way! They're not drowning me in that river—there's a dead man in there!"

Dan the Man bullied them out onto the grass. Mrs. Pebbleridge resisted, and he gave her a yank that sent her sprawling. "Easy!" Mrs. Dulcie scolded. Then he made them wait by the van while he maneuvered the Hyundai into a suitable launch position.

"Keep clear of the Dodge." It was Fan. "Don't want to hang the rattletrap up above the waterline. Give away the farm. Have some nosey parker spot

it on a clear day from the bridge."

"Not that bridge," Dan answered, hanging out the door on his elbow and easing the car towards the water. Fan moved in to give him hand signals and orders.

The captured Bingo Lady Avengers waited. Mrs. Dulcie, a step behind the others, suddenly gasped.

"Mrs. Pebbleridge!" she hissed. "Your hands are free!"

"What?" snapped Winona.

"The tape sort of came loose in the van," Mrs. Pebbleridge explained. "I got to wondering about tape, how it worked, and it came loose. I've been trying not to think about it in case they read my mind and figure I broke it on purpose, and then punish me."

"Read your mind? Read a blank page?" Winona snapped. "You waste of body parts! Hurry and untape us, too!" It was done in a moment. "Now stand still and keep your hands behind you like before. They might have a gun or something. We need to wait for just the right moment—then we'll jump 'em."

Mrs. Pebbleridge whimpered at the thought.

Galloping swiftly over the hardtop, up on the Bridge to Nowhere, a troubled Wild Luba Moony did battle with her thoughts. She had learned long

ago not to interfere; however slightly, in the bewildering affairs of the people around her. But surely those women down there could use her help. She thought she knew the man, he was the new and nasty one in town. And as she watched he threw one of the women to the ground.

Her gallop slowed.
Became a canter.
Then a trot.
She stopped.

The women waited. The twins debated by the car. Planning their escape, Winona Delmare decided. They'd get clean away. Nobody'd find the Avengers for days, weeks, years. The Parent-Teacher would put up a plaque to Mrs. Pebbleridge. Mrs. Dulcie's Shopper's Delite would be sold and torn down, and they'd put a car lot there, full of Hyundais to drown plump ladies in.

The Vanderveer twins turned and began stalking toward them.

"Here they come," Mrs. Dulcie said.

"Wait for my signal," Winona warned them.

"Wait till we're under water," Mrs. Pebbleridge sobbed.

The Vanderveers were three steps away. An evil light shone in Fan's eye.

And suddenly—

There was a sound to their left like a drumming of hooves.

They all turned, astonished, to see a strange apparition, a girl in mid-air, almost on top of them, clearing the tops of a row of horse chestnuts like a champion jumper at a steeplechase. She landed clean and balanced, practically on Dan's toes, and galloped away briskly into the dark along the river.

"Hey!" shouted Dan Vanderveer. "Get her!" yelled Fan. "Hey!" Dan hollered, louder, and bolted after her.

Which left only Fan.

"Good at bingo, are you?" Winona asked in a menacing tone.

"Better than you," snapped Fan.

"Good. Try this call. Under the eye—five!"

Winona slugged her.

"Bingo!" Mrs. Dulcie cried.

Fan's knees buckled, and she sat flat down beside the van with a look of sudden and complete uninterest on her face.

Wild Luba cantered easily by again, whacking her flank, with Dan Vanderveer throwing himself after her and wheezing like a steam engine.

"Quick. Get the sticky-tape," Winona shouted.

They soon had Fan Vanderveer wrapped like something you could ship around the world.

Luba Moony was back once more, trotting on the spot, chuffing and flaring her nostrils. But she wasn't even

breathing hard. "Where's the killer?" Winona asked her.

Luba pointed, then galloped off and was gone. They all looked. There, seemingly a mile above the river, was the silhouette of Dan the Man Vanderveer, still running, beetling over the enormous main span of the moonlit Bridge to Nowhere on his way east—to East Selkirk, East Kildonan, and if nobody stopped him, maybe the Near East, the Middle East, and the Far East after that.

"Look at him run," Mrs. Dulcie marvelled.

"Waltzing away," pointed out Mrs. Pebbleridge.

"It's okay," Winona Delmare assured them. "Let him waltz. We got the brains of the operation." She gestured at Fan Vanderveer, securely bound with tape to the bucket seat in the truck. "Or at least half a

brain. The police can find the other half easy. Just got to follow the waggly lines. And remember, if there's any reward—I get it." She climbed up behind the wheel of the minivan. "You lead and we'll follow, Mrs. Pebbleridge."

Easing out after the Hyundai, in a jolly conversational voice Winona asked Mrs. Dulcie, who was hunkered down on the floor of the van behind the swaddled Vanderveer twin, "Did you ever take and drive on out and cross over that Bridge to Nowhere?"

"No, and I don't want to."

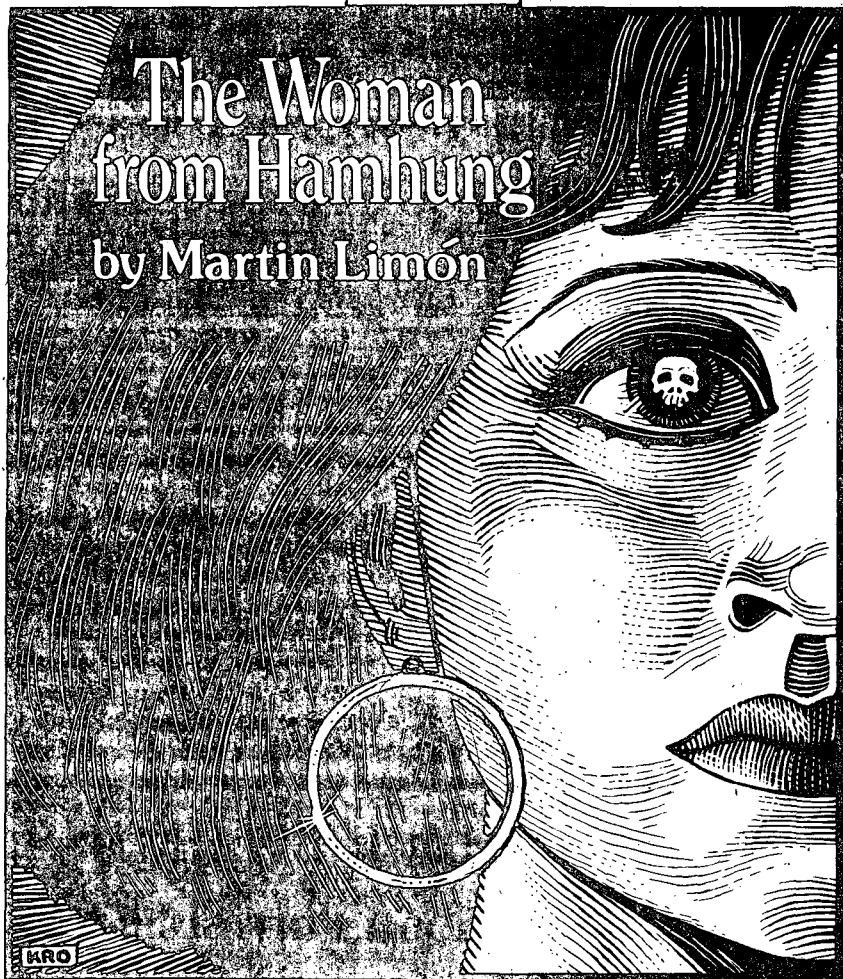
"Why not?"

"I'm already nowhere. I'm satisfied."

Slowly, ever so slowly, so as not to discomfit their important passenger, they followed Mrs. Pebbleridge's taillights back to End of Main.

The Woman from Hamhung

by Martin Limón



We wound through the jumbled alleyways of Seoul's East Gate Market, past freshly washed fish in packed blue ice and mounds of Chinese cabbage glowing green in the canvas-

covered darkness. In the heart of the catacombs a few large spools of industrial copper wire waited for a buyer. Ernie wrote down the case lot numbers.

"Hot off the compound," he said.

The blackmarket had been going strong here since the end of the Korean War, primarily because of the lack of indigenous industry and the exorbitant import taxes levied on foreign goods. Guarding the plethora of U.S.-made building supplies on army compounds were always a few GI's willing to go after some easy money.

At least sometimes the money was easy.

Our job was to stanch the flow of these supplies. Some of them. At least for a while.

A wrinkled forehead over a big red dress waddled towards us. She shrieked and waved her arms. Ernie put his notepad away, snapped his gum between his front teeth, and stalked off in the general direction of the rushing traffic on the main street.

"Not your typical Oriental hospitality," I said.

Ernie snorted.

Our next stop was SP51, 8th Army's biggest supply point in Seoul.

We flashed our badges to a sullen corporal, thumbed through a small mountain of paperwork, and in a couple of hours had determined that the case lots in question had all been shipped north to the 2nd Infantry Division. After a few phone calls to the 2nd Division logistics office, we found out that some of the numbered

spools had been issued to Camp Howze and some to Camp Edwards.

"Which one's closer to the DMZ?" Ernie asked.

"Edwards. But they say it has a better NCO club. And besides, I've already been to the village outside Howze."

"Then it's Edwards?"

"Right."

When we reported to the first sergeant, he stood in front of a metal urn of coffee tipping the last dregs into his big porcelain cup.

"What'd you get?" He didn't look at us.

"The copper wire's coming out of Camp Edwards," Ernie said.

"All of it?"

"Yeah."

"Then that's where we'll go."

The first sergeant mixed some cream and sugar into his coffee, returned to his desk, and took a sip of the lukewarm concoction. A grimace split his face. "When is that Miss Kim going to learn how to make coffee?"

"When you quit riding her," I said.

The first sergeant shot a look at me, thought better of some remark, and took another careful sip of his bitter brew.

"One of you is going to have to go undercover up there," he said.

"For a few spools of wire?"

"It's more than just that. The

Korean National Police are complaining that their construction sites have been flooded with U.S.-made blackmarket goods for the last few months. It's cutting into the sales of their local industries."

"The big shots are getting hurt," Ernie said.

The first sergeant glared at him. "Which one of you is it going to be? For the undercover, I mean."

Ernie touched his long bony fingers to his ribs. "Me, I've got to nurse my war wounds."

"Yeah. That's right." The first sergeant turned to me. "Sueño, you'll be the undercover man up there. We'll have orders cut for you today. Tomorrow you'll report to the Replacement Company up at the 2nd Infantry Division. Bascom, you'll be his control. Keep him out of trouble."

"I always get the hard jobs," Ernie said.

We left the first sergeant's office, clattered down the long hallway of the Criminal Investigation Division headquarters, and hopped in Ernie's jeep. The three story brick building loomed over us as the sturdy little vehicle roared to life.

"The only wounds you got from Vietnam," I said, "are the scars on your liver."

"Yeah," Ernie said. "But they run deep."

Snow speckled with coal dust

swirled behind us as the little jeep lurched forward into the dark afternoon.

My name is George Sueño. My partner Ernie Bascom and I had been kicking around Korea for the last few months as army CID agents, solving a few cases, blowing a few others, getting in trouble.

The CID Detachment first sergeant wasn't too happy with us, but that was because we had a bad habit of not knowing when to wrap up a case if some nefarious activities seemed to be pointing in the direction of someone with a little rank. At the 8th Army headquarters, rocking the boat is considered to be a mortal sin.

Even so, Ernie and I had managed to hang on. Barely.

I'm what you might call an orphan. The army's my home now. My mother died when I was two years old—suddenly—and my father slipped south of the border into that endless cavern of mystery known as Mexico. I grew up in foster homes, in East L.A., got luckier than most with the foster parents I drew, paid attention in school, and now I'm a highly trained agent for the Criminal Investigation Division of the 8th U.S. Army in the Republic of Korea.

Beats low-riding Olympic Boulevard.

My partner, Ernie Bascom, had a stable youth and an adventurous adolescence, and then ran into the brick wall of Vietnam. After two tours in Chu Lai he had acquired a number of bad habits. The breakable ones, like heroin, were behind him now. The unbreakable ones, like the United States Army and mouthing off, were probably going to stay with him for the rest of his life.

So when we got the orders to go to Camp Edwards we both saw it as an opportunity to screw off for a while. Get away from the flagpole. Run the village. We would go through the motions, but if we arrested somebody for blackmarketing army-owned building supplies, they would have to be trying to get caught.

Of course, a lot of people were.

After a couple of days at the "Repo Depot," the 2nd Infantry Division's Replacement Company, I had gotten the shortest haircut of my life, sewn two dozen Indianhead patches on the sleeves of all my uniforms, and stood about a million useless formations. When the bus marked "Western Corridor" pulled out of Camp Casey and wound through the snow-covered hills, I took a deep breath and watched the smoke curl from straw-thatched farm-

houses. An occasional water buffalo snorted through wet nostrils, breath billowing towards the grey sky.

Camp Edwards was a large compound that sprawled for half a mile along the Main Supply Route leading north to the Demilitarized Zone. It was composed mainly of boxy concrete buildings, curved roof Quonset huts, and barbed-wire-enclosed storage areas. Everything that didn't move, plus some things that did, was painted the army's favorite color: olive drab.

I processed in through the orderly room of the Headquarters Company of the Seven-Oh-Deuce Maintenance and Supply Battalion, like my orders said. I received grunts from the company clerk and indifference from the supply sergeant, and then picked up a small pile of linen and blankets. An old Korean man in slippers, cutoff fatigue pants, and a black pullover sweater led me to my bunk. He told me it would be twenty-five bucks a month for him to do my laundry and shine my shoes. I paid him in advance and then we shook hands. Of all the people I'd met that day, he was the first to give me a personal greeting.

Another warm welcome from the United States Army.

The setup was that I'd process into Headquarters Company just like any other new

trooper and set about working every day, keeping my eyes and ears open until I found out who was diverting the supplies into the blackmarket. Ernie would be my control, and we had set up predetermined times for me to call or meet him at the Recreation Center-4 Snack Bar, about four miles to the north, to give him my reports. I also had a number where I could reach him at night in case of emergency: the RC4 Enlisted Club.

The supply point filled the basin that sat in the center of the loop. I squatted on a raggedy patch of grass behind the barracks overlooking the basin and watched.

A trash collection truck painted bright blue, pulled through the gate in the chain link fence that surrounded the supply point. A bunch of Korean workmen in faded and soiled fatigues jumped off the bed of the truck, pulled off some empty metal drums, and replaced them with those that were filled with trash. The truck pulled out of the supply point and continued on its rounds, picking up trash behind the mess hall and the NCO Club and the dispensary.

At the main gate, before the trash truck left the compound, an MP climbed up on the bed and used a long wooden pole to

rummage through the trash drums, checking for any sort of contraband the workmen might be trying to smuggle off post.

While I was watching the trash collectors, a two and a half ton army truck rolled into the supply point. A group of slick-sleeve privates loaded the bed of the truck with something that from this distance looked like lumber and cement. When they were finished, the bed of the deuce-and-a-half sat low on its tires. Then everything was covered with a canvas tarp and tied up neatly.

Later I wandered down the hill towards the supply point and, when I got close enough, jotted down the bumper number of the truck. It was hard to read. Everything's done in dark letters—camouflage—so in case the North Koreans ever invade again, maybe they'll just sort of overlook us.

Except for the cooks in the kitchen, the NCO Club was deserted this time of day. I found a phone at the bar and dialed the number of the RC4 Snack Bar. The Korean who answered told me she didn't know anybody named Ernie Bascom.

"He's the guy with the round glasses," I said. "Chewing gum and playing the pinball machine."

"Oh." She set the phone down, and after a couple of minutes

Ernie came on the line.

"How's it hanging, pal?"

"Loosely. I got a bumper number for you. Ready to write?"

"Shoot."

"Seven-oh-two MB on the left side and then SP14-23 on the right."

"A truck?"

"Yeah. I don't think they'll be going anywhere tonight. They'd be too conspicuous out after curfew. Probably leave first thing in the morning."

"I'll be there." Ernie sipped on something. Coffee, I figured.

"How's the club?"

"It hasn't opened yet. What're you gonna do tonight?"

"Run the ville."

"That little pissant village right outside the gate?"

"No. The one where the officers and senior NCO's hang out. Kumchon. About a mile and a half down the road. How late will you be in the NCO Club?"

"How late do you want me to be there?"

"I doubt that I'll be able to last much past ten. I didn't get much sleep over at the Repo Depot."

"Good. That'll give me two hours before curfew to police something up down in Sonyuri."

"I'll meet you at the club there at RC4 tomorrow night about six, so you can tell me about it."

"And about the truck tomorrow morning."

"Yeah. That, too."

After the retreat formation I went to the chow hall and had supper and then over to the orderly room and signed out on pass. The pass stipulated that I had to be back on compound before the midnight curfew or I'd be counted as AWOL. I wouldn't get my overnight pass until tomorrow when I received my venereal disease orientation from the first sergeant. They'd already given us one at the Repo Depot, but no matter how many times GI's are told about the dangers, they still end up poking around in places where they shouldn't.

I flashed my pass and I.D. card to the MP at the gate. There were a few paltry little bars in a small village across the MSR. That's where most of the GI's went. And a lot of them were shackled up in the little hooches that sprawled off into the surrounding rice paddies. I had already heard that the senior NCO's and officers all went to Kumchon—a real town, not just a GI village. I figured that the amount of supplies being diverted indicated more than just a little low-level pilfering, so I flagged down a Kimchi Cab and told the driver to take me to Kumchon.

When we got there, he asked

me where I wanted to get out. I didn't know, but after about two blocks, downtown Kumchon petered out and we were winding through frozen rice paddies again. I told him to stop, paid him, and wandered back toward the bright lights. The road through town was only two lanes, and the shops on either side were pushed right up against the narrow sidewalks. Kumchon had what all towns have: pharmacies, restaurants, a place for milling rice, a stationery store, and a few bars. I peeked through the windows of the bars but saw only ROK soldiers in uniform, toasting one another and laughing too loud. Finally, at the other end of town, I saw a bar with a little more neon than the others. The sign in Korean said KUM GOM—golden dream. The smaller English lettering beneath it said GOLDEN NIGHT CLUB.

There's a difference between a golden night and a golden dream, but it looked like the Koreans who worked there weren't going to let the GI's in on it.

I walked in. It was a big club, bigger than the others I had looked in on, and there were already a few GI's, in small clusters, sitting around at the tables. A few waitresses— young, pretty girls all—served them, and a few sat at the ta-

bles, slapping the groping GI hands and laughing.

The music was loud, but not so loud that you couldn't talk, and it tended to be a little more sedate than what I figured I'd find in the clubs across the street from Camp Edwards.

Two grizzled old NCO types sat at one end of the bar, talking to a smiling barmaid. I sat at the other end of the bar, and when she stood up and walked towards me, I saw that she was a big woman. Broad shouldered. Ample dimensions everywhere. Gorgeous.

I ordered my beer in Korean and that made her smile and then she came back to see how well I could really speak the language and after a while, with that openness that only Orientals can have, she told me that she was twenty-four, divorced with a daughter, and had originally come south with her family when she was an infant during the Korean War. Her hometown was Hamhung, far to the north in that area of the world that the Cold War mapmakers were still painting in red.

The guys at the other end of the bar got antsy and then she had other orders to fill, but as soon as she had everybody smiling again she came back to me. I had a couple more liters of beer and we talked like we were old friends. Her eyes lit up

when I told her that I had just arrived in the country, on my second tour in Korea. Opportunity for both of us. Her name was Miss Ma.

Someone kicked the door in and a group of shouting, hooting Americans trundled through the door. Officers. Even in civilian clothes they were practically wearing signs around their necks. First of all, they were acting like jerks. Also, they all had whitewall haircuts and bluejeans and sportshirts that, although wrinkled, had been neatly pressed before they left the compound. They also acted like they owned the place.

They pulled a couple of tables together and started ordering and grabbing at the waitresses, and one of them peeled away from the group and lumbered towards the bar. Miss Ma moved away from me quickly.

When he got to the bar, he didn't order anything but just leaned over and whispered something in her ear. At first she didn't move, but then she spoke to him and he seemed to get mad and she spoke again and then she had him convinced of something and they were both nodding and he walked away. She got busy filling orders from the waitresses, and it was another ten minutes before she got back to me.

"Are you going back to the compound tonight?"

"Yes. I won't have an over-night until tomorrow."

She exhaled slightly—relieved—and then her shoulders rose and she smiled. "Maybe I will see you then?"

Playing hard to get is a ploy that has never entered my repertoire.

"You will," I said.

After a couple more beers and a few dirty looks from the officer who had talked to Miss Ma, I stumbled out the door and made it back to Camp Edwards. Once I got into the rack, visions of her smiling face danced before me. Later that night I tried to struggle free from miles of unraveling copper wire, spinning off its spool, entrapping me in an ever-shrinking web of shimmering metal.

After watching the overloaded deuce-and-a-half pull out just before dawn, I spent the day trying to get into the routine of my new job as the assistant company clerk. The first sergeant was a little young, as first sergeants go, and seemed to be in over his head. The company clerk, Specialist 5 Flourey, didn't seem too efficient, either. Basically the whole place was a mess. I did what I could, straightening out some files, typing some stuff for the first sergeant, but mainly I concentrated on finding out who was

who. After work I showered and shaved, signed out on my new overnight pass, and took a cab north to the RC4 Enlisted Club.

I pulled Ernie away from the bar, and we sat at the most isolated table we could find, which is sort of difficult in a one room Quonset hut.

"The guy who drove the truck," I said, "was Sergeant First Class Rawlings, NCO-in-charge of the supply point."

"That's a lot of stripes for driving a truck full of supplies."

"Depends on where he was going."

Ernie stopped the waitress and ordered us a couple of Falstaffs. "He went up north to the DMZ, Camp Kitty Hawk. A group of GI's unloaded the truck, and after he left I checked out the supplies."

"Find anything?"

"Nothing but lumber and cement. I hotfooted it down the MSR and caught up with him."

"No other stops?"

"None."

"They must be getting the wire off post some other way."

We sipped on our beer for a while.

"They must be covering for him back at Camp Edwards," I said. "That amount of supplies couldn't be disappearing without somebody higher up noticing it."

"Who's the logistics officer?"

"Captain Calloway. All I got

is a name so far. I'll match it to a face tomorrow."

"We've got to get into the supply point and check their invoices."

"Yeah," I said. "I think I can manage it. But not tonight."

"Why?"

"We might as well make this all-expenses-paid trip last for a while."

Ernie nodded.

"And besides, I've got a date tonight."

The waitress brought our beers, smiling at Ernie. "So do I," he said. "With the entire village of Sonyu-ri."

A couple of hours later, Ernie wandered out into the village and I caught a cab and made it back to Kumchon. Twenty minutes before the midnight curfew, Miss Ma took me by the hand and led me down long rows of narrow, dark alleys until we got to her hooch. Lying on the warm floor I discovered that she was more wonderful than I had imagined.

Her daughter slept on the mat beside us.

In the middle of the afternoon a neatly uniformed officer stormed into the orderly room and chewed out the first sergeant for putting his supply point people on the duty roster. The first sergeant patiently explained that he was only trying to comply with army regula-

tions, but the young captain didn't, appear at all satisfied. When he stomped out of the office he shot a quick glance at me, and I realized that he was Miss Ma's paramour from the Golden Night Club. I also saw his nametag. Captain Callo-way. The logistics officer.

I wedged the crowbar into the back window of the big Quonset hut, and after I pried in three different spots, it slammed open. I crawled through the window and closed it behind me. The place was typical GI issue. Rows of gray desks, filing cabinets, and a disbursing counter in the middle of the big cylindrical barn. I pulled out the flashlight I had bought at the PX and rifled through some of the files.

I had my list of invoices, but the pertinent ones weren't where they were supposed to be. I figured they'd just been removed. We would have to go back to the issuing point at Camp Casey and get their copies of the invoices, which were sequentially numbered, to prove that Camp Edwards had received the stuff. If they'd also been removed there, we'd have to go back to Seoul. It would be a lot of work, but eventually the accountability would be established.

I checked some of the desks. Nothing. Then I checked the desk with SFC Rawlings' name

plate perched on the front edge. I found them in the bottom drawer, wadded up under a half empty bottle of Old Overholt. I spread them out on the desk, took a shot of the whisky straight from the bottle, and shone my little flashlight on them.

About thirty invoices altogether. The ones I had on my list and a whole bunch more. Enough to put these guys away. I still didn't have the link, though. Captain Calloway, the logistics officer, would certainly be found guilty of dereliction of duty for not checking on them, but I would need more proof to nail him for actual collusion in the scheme. It could even go up beyond him. Maybe to the post commander.

Farfetched, perhaps. But it wouldn't be the first time.

Behind one of the file cabinets was a little closet with a non-army padlock on it. I looked through Sergeant Rawlings' desk until I found a key. It worked. The closet was filled with some of your more valuable supplies: a brand new buffer with a pad, a few field jackets, a case full of Coleman lanterns. Under the shelves I found two large metal disks, about three feet across. They were rusted and soiled. Next to them lay a metal pole about four feet long. It had a narrow, flattened hook on the end.

I thought about it for a while, relocked the closet, and then went back and had another shot of Old Overholt.

I put the bottle of whisky back where I'd found it, stuffed the invoices in my shirt, and climbed out the window. I rolled around in the snow for a minute, got my footing, and then stood up to close the window. Footsteps.

Before I could turn around something smashed the back of my head through my skull and splattered my brains against the olive drab walls of the sheet metal Quonset hut.

At least that's what it felt like. I came to after a few minutes, and when my eyes could focus, I checked my watch. Almost nine. I'd been lying there for an hour. Wait until I told the sergeant major about his security guards.

I stood up and checked the various parts of my body. There was a big knot on the back of my head, but otherwise I was okay. The invoices, of course, were gone.

I almost climbed back into the Quonset hut to get the bottle of Old Overholt, but then I remembered that the NCO Club was open. I could see the lights from there, and as I slogged up the hill I heard the music. I dusted the dirty ice off my jacket and gingerly combed my hair.

When I got to the bar I ordered a double shot of bourbon, straight up, and a Falstaff back.

Nothing had ever tasted sweeter.

I got drunk that night. Very drunk. And when they closed the club I wandered out into the darkness thinking about Miss Ma, but I never made it farther than the barracks, where I hit my bunk and passed out.

In the morning I took off my clothes, showered, shaved, and went directly to the dispensary. They gave me aspirin.

Ernie called me at the orderly room. It was a serious break in cover.

"What the hell is it, pal?"

"There's been a murder. Outside. In Kumchon. What'd you tell me her name was?"

"The girl I was seeing?"

"Yeah."

"Miss Ma."

"That's her."

I clutched the receiver. The throbbing in my head seemed about to explode. I spoke carefully.

"How soon can you pick me up at the front gate?"

"Twenty minutes."

"I'll be there."

I told the first sergeant I had to go. He didn't like it, but I told him it would all be explained to him later. He said it'd better.

I ran back to the barracks,

changed into my bluejeans and sneakers, and was waiting at the front gate when Ernie's jeep pulled up in a burst of slush.

She looked like she was asleep at first until you noticed the huge indentation in her neck. And the copper wire.

The Korean police asked me how I knew her. Ernie had returned my CID identification to me, and I flashed it at them. I told them we had been working on a case on the compound—pilfering of supplies—and we believed this murder might be related.

The landlady had discovered the body early that morning. She hadn't seen who had spent the night with Miss Ma, but whoever he was, he had paid to have the old woman take care of the child for the evening.

Somebody who was flush. And wanted to get rid of witnesses.

After the police were finished in the room, they just left her there. The landlady was supposed to be trying to notify Miss Ma's relatives, but so far she wasn't having any luck. I didn't hear the little girl. When I looked in the landlady's room, she was just sitting there, her head down. No tears.

On the way back to Camp Edwards I told Ernie about getting beaned the night before. I also told him about the in-

voices, and the metal disks, and the long slender hook. He saw it right away.

"They were smuggling out the spools of wire under a false bottom in the trash drums."

"Right. And since they had that down to a science, no sense going after the more awkward stuff like lumber and cement and steel bars."

"And whoever followed you last night knew he had to get his hands on those invoices."

"Yeah," I said. "But he also knew that eventually we'd follow the chain of paperwork until we nailed both the NCO-in-charge and the logistics officer. With a good lawyer they might be able to avoid getting charged with direct culpability, but no matter how you look at it, that much thievery on their watch would ruin their careers."

"The young captain would be out on his ass, and the old sarge would be lucky to hang on until retirement." Ernie popped another stick of gum into his mouth. "So why the girl?"

"Whoever it was that popped me on the head thought it over later and decided that he should have killed me. Aware of Miss Ma's charms, he decided that even with a bump on the head I'd make it out to her hooch last night."

"But you didn't?"

"No. So he was sitting there like a dummy, staring at her,

and all she'd have to do is open her mouth once and I'd know who was behind the whole scene."

"So he killed her?"

"Exactly."

Ernie shook his head. "The guy should have taken the rap for the copper wire. Let it go at that."

We flashed our identification to the MP's at the main gate, and Ernie stared up the hill.

"Who do we see first? Sergeant Rawlings or Captain Calloway?"

I thought about it. Captain Calloway was a young officer, the kind that cherished his army career maybe more than he cherished his left testicle. But still he was young. And had a college degree. If he got kicked out with a bad discharge, he could get up, dust himself off, and continue to march. Sergeant Rawlings, on the other hand, didn't even have a high school diploma. And the skills he'd learned in the army—chewing out privates and pilfering supplies—don't pay a lot on the outside. He'd probably end up driving a hack and working on systematically demolishing his liver.

I decided to go with the more desperate of the two.

"Sergeant Rawlings first," I said.

We found Rawlings at the

NCO Club, on his favorite barstool, having a shot of bourbon with his lunch. It looked like the Chef's Special was pretzels.

He was a big burly guy with wrists as thick as my biceps, so we didn't bother with any formalities. Ernie slammed his head down on the bar, I pulled his left wrist back and cuffed it, and then we both wrestled him off the stool until we got both his arms cuffed behind his back. Ernie took his knees off his spine long enough to read him his rights.

"Why'd you kill the girl, Rawlings?"

"What girl?"

"Miss Ma. Out at the Golden Night Club."

"Stuff it."

He clammed up and said he would tell us nothing until he talked to a lawyer. That's what I like about old NCO's. They always take a common sense approach to problem solving.

We walked him down the hill, attracting a lot of attention along the way, and locked him up in the tiny MP station.

Captain Calloway's neatly painted jeep sat in front of the logistics office. I checked the odometer, yanked the trip ticket off its clipboard, and compared the readings.

Everything clicked, like a bunch of zeros lining up at a hundred thousand miles.

When we went in, he was talking on the phone and thumbing through some paperwork, acting way too busy to talk to us.

When he finally hung up, he said, "Who the hell are you?"

I showed him my badge. He smirked.

"Undercover, huh? Well, you won't find anything missing here at Supply Point 14. And all that copper wire, that can be explained."

Like I said, some people just want to get caught.

Ernie spoke first. "We're not here about the wire."

Captain Calloway flinched but quickly straightened out his face. I held up the trip ticket.

"Your driver logged out the jeep last night at 12,463 miles but now the odometer reading is 12,466 miles. Three miles. It's a mile and a half to Kumchon, so that jeep has traveled the equivalent of one round trip."

Captain Calloway's neck muscles worked up and down his throat, and his right hand crawled towards the telephone receiver, as if he were going to call for help.

I continued. "You started watching me when you noticed I was speaking Korean to Miss Ma at the Golden Night Club. Not your typical GI on his first tour in the Orient. That's why

you were raising hell in the orderly room. An excuse to check me out. And then you followed me when I went into the warehouse last night, and clubbed me over the head with something when I came out.

"You've probably already destroyed the invoices, but you knew that with a little homework we'd uncover the whole scheme. You could deny any accusation Rawlings might make against you, just accuse him of trying to bargain his way out of it, but in the end you'd be charged with dereliction of duty for letting your subordinates get away with so many dollars' worth of supplies. Even if you were found innocent, it would mean the end of your army career.

"Hitting me over the head and destroying the invoices would only delay it, give yourself a little more time. A little time to go out to Kumchon and take your revenge on Miss Ma for finding a new boyfriend. Or maybe take your revenge on the new boyfriend and stop him from blowing the whistle on your little blackmarket scheme. What you didn't expect is that I wouldn't go out there. Maybe you told her that you'd seen to it that I wouldn't get an overnight pass. Maybe you threatened her. But when I didn't show up, you decided to take her out."

Calloway stared directly at me, but for him I wasn't there.

Ernie clicked his gum a couple of times.

"We can check with the MP's on duty last night," I said. "They'll remember your driving your jeep off post."

Calloway stood up slowly. "There's no need." He bowed his head for a moment, and then he looked up at us. "It was all Rawlings' idea. He said he'd done it before, on previous tours over here. It was easy money. I used the money at first to spend weekends down in Seoul. In first class hotels. But then I met Miss Ma, and instead I spent all my time in Kumchon. I tried to get her to quit her job, stay with me, but she didn't want to."

His eyes widened, as if he were amazed at something.

"I'm an officer, with a good future, and I was getting rich, but still she turned me down. Can you believe it? But you, with no money, just here for a few days..."

He shook his head, angry at the tears that were squeezing themselves out of his knotted face.

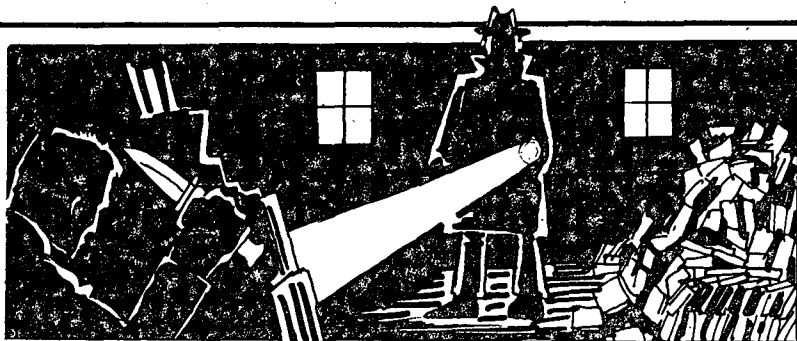
Ernie's gum clicked faster. He didn't like this kind of thing. He twisted Calloway around and made him assume the position up against the wall. Then he cuffed him and read him his rights. All the while Calloway cried, and when Ernie was finished, he had to unwrap two more sticks of gum and pop them nervously into his mouth.

We stayed at RC4 for a couple more days, wrapping things up, trying to enjoy the freedom of being away from the flagpole for a while, but it didn't work.

Someone from Miss Ma's family finally came and took her body away. And the little girl.

We went back to Seoul.

On cold winter nights I still think of the woman from Hamhung, with her big warm smile, and the little girl who refused to cry.



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MYSTERY CLASSIC

Aunt Agatha Takes the Count

—by P. G. Wodehouse—



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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“Jeeves,” I said, “we’ve backed a winner.”
“Sir?”

“Coming to this place, I mean. Here we are in a topping hotel, with fine weather, good cooking, golf, bathing, gambling of every variety, and my Aunt Agatha miles away on the other side of the English Channel. I ask you, what could be sweeter?”

I had to leg it, if you remember, with considerable speed from London because my Aunt Agatha was on my track with a hatchet as the result of the breaking off of my engagement to Honoria Glossop. The thing hadn’t been my fault, but I couldn’t have convinced Aunt Agatha of that if I’d argued for a week; so it had seemed to me that the judicious course to pursue was to buzz briskly off while the buzzing was good. I was standing now at the window of the extremely decent suite which I’d taken at the Hotel Splendide at Roville on the French coast, and as I looked down at the people popping to and fro in the sunshine, and reflected that in about a quarter of an hour I was due to lunch with a girl who was the exact opposite of Honoria Glossop in every way, I felt dashed uplifted. Gay, genial, happy-go-lucky, and devil-may-care, if you know what I mean.

I had met this girl—Aline Hemmingway her name was—for the first time on the train coming from Paris. She was going to Roville to wait for a brother who was due to arrive from England. I had helped her with her baggage, got into conversation, had a bite of dinner with her in the restaurant car, and the result was we had become remarkably chummy. I’m a bit apt, as a rule, to give the modern girl a miss; but there was something different about Aline Hemmingway.

I turned round, humming a blithe melody, and Jeeves shied like a startled mustang.

I had rather been expecting some such display of emotion on the man’s part, for I was trying out a fairly fruity cummerbund that morning—one of those silk contrivances, you know, which you tie round your waist, something on the order of a sash, only more substantial. I had seen it in a shop the day before and hadn’t been able to resist it, but I’d known all along that there might be trouble with Jeeves. It was a pretty brightish scarlet.

“I beg your pardon, sir,” he said, in a sort of hushed voice. “You are surely not proposing to appear in public in that thing?”

“What, Cuthbert the Cummerbund?” I said in a careless, debonair way, passing it off. “Rather!”

“I should not advise it, sir, really I shouldn’t.”

"Why not?"

"The effect, sir, is loud in the extreme."

I tackled the blighter squarely. I mean to say, nobody knows better than I do that Jeeves is a mastermind and all that, but, dash it, a fellow must call his soul his own. You can't be a serf to your valet.

"You know, the trouble with you, Jeeves," I said, "is that you're too—what's the word I want?—too bally insular. You can't realize that you aren't in Piccadilly all the time. In a place like this, simply dripping with the gaiety and *joie-de-vivre* of France, a bit of color and a touch of the poetic is expected of you. Why, last night at the casino I saw a fellow in a full evening suit of yellow velvet."

"Nevertheless, sir—"

"Jeeves," I said, firmly, "my mind is made up. I'm in a foreign country; it's a corking day; God's in his heaven and all's right with the world and this cummerbund seems to me to be called for."

"Very good, sir," said Jeeves coldly.

Dashed upsetting, this sort of thing. If there's one thing that gives me the pip, it's unpleasantness in the home; and I could see that relations were going to be pretty fairly strained for a while. I suppose the old brow must have been a bit furrowed or something, for Aline Hemmingway spotted that things were wrong directly we sat down to lunch.

"You seem depressed, Mr. Wooster," she said. "Have you been losing money at the casino?"

"No," I said. "As a matter of fact, I won quite a goodish sum last night."

"But something is the matter. What is it?"

"Well, to tell you the truth," I said, "I've just had rather a painful scene with my man, and it's shaken me a bit. He doesn't like this cummerbund."

"Why, I've just been admiring it. I think it's very becoming."

"No, really?"

"It has rather a Spanish effect."

"Exactly what I thought myself. Extraordinary you should have said that. A touch of the hidalgo, what? Sort of Vincente y Blasco What's-his-name stuff. The jolly old hidalgo off to the bullfight, what?"

"Yes. Or a corsair of the Spanish Main."

"Absolutely! I say, you know, you have bucked me up. It's a rummy thing about you—how sympathetic you are, I mean. The

ordinary girl you meet today is all bobbed hair and gaspers, but you—”

I was about to continue in this strain, when somebody halted at our table, and the girl jumped up.

“Sidney!” she cried.

The chappie who had anchored in our midst was a small, round cove with a face rather like a sheep. He wore pince-nez, his expression was benevolent, and he had on one of those collars which button at the back. A parson, in fact.

“Well, my dear,” he said, beaming pretty freely, “here I am at last.”

“Are you very tired?”

“Not at all. A most enjoyable journey, in which tedium was rendered impossible by the beauty of the scenery through which we passed and the entertaining conversation of my fellow travelers. But may I be presented to this gentleman?” he said, peering at me through his pince-nez.

“This is Mr. Wooster,” said the girl, “who was very kind to me coming from Paris. Mr. Wooster, this is my brother.”

We shook hands, and the brother went off to get a wash.

“Sidney’s such a dear,” said the girl. “I know you’ll like him.”

“Seems a topper.”

“I do hope he will enjoy his stay here. It’s so seldom he gets a holiday. His vicar overworks him dreadfully.”

“Vicars are the devil, what?”

“I wonder if you will be able to spare any time to show him round the place? I can see he’s taken such a fancy to you. But, of course, it would be a bother, I suppose, so—”

“Rather not. Only too delighted.” For half a second I thought of patting her hand, then I felt I’d better wait a bit. “I’ll do anything, absolutely anything.”

“It’s awfully kind of you.”

“For you,” I said, “I would—”

At this point the brother returned, and the conversation became what you might call general.

After lunch I fairly curvetted back to my suite, with a most extraordinary braced sensation going all over me like a rash.

“Jeeves,” I said, “you were all wrong about that cummerbund. It went like a breeze from the start.”

“Indeed, sir?”

“Made an absolutely outstanding hit. The lady I was lunching

with admired it. Her brother admired it. The waiter looked as if he admired it. Well, anything happened since I left?"

"Yes, sir. Mrs. Gregson has arrived at the hotel."

A fellow I know who went shooting, and was potted by one of his brother sportsmen in mistake for a rabbit, once told me that it was several seconds before he realized that he had contributed to the day's bag. For about a tenth of a minute everything seemed quite okay, and then suddenly he got it. It was just the same with me. It took about five seconds for this fearful bit of news to sink in.

"What!" I yelled. "Aunt Agatha here?"

"Yes, sir."

"She can't be."

"I have seen her, sir."

"But how did she get here?"

"The express from Paris has just arrived, sir."

"But, I mean, how the dickens did she know I was here?"

"You left a forwarding address at the flat for your correspondence, sir. No doubt Mrs. Gregson obtained it from the hall porter."

"But I told the chump not to give it away to a soul."

"That would hardly baffle a lady of Mrs. Gregson's forceful personality, sir."

"Jeeves, I'm in the soup."

"Yes, sir."

"Right up to the hocks!"

"Yes, sir."

"What shall I do?"

"I fear I have nothing to suggest, sir."

I eyed the man narrowly. Dashed aloof his manner was. I saw what was the matter, of course. He was still brooding over that cummerbund.

"I shall go for a walk, Jeeves," I said.

"Yes, sir?"

"A good long walk."

"Very good, sir."

"And if—er—if anybody asks for me, tell 'em you don't know when I'll be back."

To people who don't know Aunt Agatha I find it extraordinarily difficult to explain why it is that she has always put the wind up me to such a frightful extent. I mean, I'm not dependent on her financially, or anything like that. It's simply personality, I've come to the conclusion. You see, all through my childhood and when I

was a kid at school she was always able to turn me inside out with a single glance, and I haven't come out from under the 'fluence yet. We run to height a bit in our family, and there's about five foot nine of Aunt Agatha, topped off with a beaky nose, an eagle eye, and a lot of grey hair, and the general effect is pretty formidable.

Her arrival in Roville at this juncture had made things more than a bit complicated for me. What to do? Leg it quick before she could get hold of me would no doubt have been the advice most fellows would have given me. But the situation wasn't as simple as that. I was in much the same position as the cat on the garden wall who, when on the point of becoming matey with the cat next door, observes the bootjack sailing through the air. If he stays where he is, he gets it in the neck; if he biffs, he has to start all over again where he left off. I didn't like the prospect of being collared by Aunt Agatha, but on the other hand I simply barred the notion of leaving Roville by the night train and parting from Aline Hemmingway. Absolutely a man's crossroads, if you know what I mean.

I prowled about the neighborhood all the afternoon and evening, then I had a bit of dinner at a quiet restaurant in the town and trickled cautiously back to the hotel. Jeeves was popping about in the suite.

"There is a note for you, sir," he said, "on the mantelpiece."

The blighter's manner was still so cold and unchummy that I bit the bullet and had a dash at being airy.

"A note, eh?"

"Yes, sir, Mrs. Gregson's maid brought it shortly after you had left."

"Tra-la-la!" I said.

"Precisely, sir."

I opened the note.

"She wants me to look in on her after dinner sometime."

"Yes, sir?"

"Jeeves," I said, "mix me a stiffish brandy and soda."

"Yes, sir."

"Stiffish, Jeeves. Not too much soda, but splash the brandy about a bit."

"Very good, sir."

He shimmered off into the background to collect the materials, and just at that moment there was a knock at the door.

I'm bound to say it was a shock. My heart stood still, and I bit my tongue.

"Come in," I bleated.

But it wasn't Aunt Agatha after all. It was Aline Hemmingway, looking rather rattled, and her brother, looking like a sheep with a secret sorrow.

"Oh, Mr. Wooster!" said the girl, in a sort of gasping way.

"Oh, what-ho!" I said. "Won't you come in? Take a seat or two."

"I don't know how to begin."

"Eh?" I said. "Is anything up?"

"Poor Sidney—it was my fault—I ought never to have let him go there alone."

At this point the brother, who had been standing by wrapped in the silence, gave a little cough, like a sheep caught in the mist of a mountaintop.

"The fact is, Mr. Wooster," he said, "I have been gambling at the casino."

"Oh!" I said. "Did you click?"

He sighed heavily.

"If you mean, was I successful, I must answer in the negative. I rashly persisted in the view that the color red, having appeared no fewer than seven times in succession, must inevitably at no distant date give place to black. I was in error. I lost my little all, Mr. Wooster."

"Tough luck," I said.

"I left the casino, and I returned to the hotel. There I encountered one of my parishioners, a Colonel Musgrave, who chanced to be holiday-making over here. I—er—induced him to cash me a check for one hundred pounds on my bank in London."

"Well, that was all to the good, what?" I said, hoping to induce the poor egg to look on the bright side. "I mean bit of luck finding someone to slip it into, first crack out of the box."

"On the contrary, Mr. Wooster, it did but make matters worse. I burn with shame as I make the confession, but I went back to the casino and lost the entire sum."

"I say!" I said. "You *are* having a night out!"

"And," concluded the chappie, "the most lamentable feature of the whole affair is that I have no funds in the bank to meet the check, when presented."

I'm free to confess that I gazed at him with no little interest and admiration. Never in my life before had I encountered a curate so genuinely all to the mustard. Little as he might look like one of the lads of the village, he certainly appeared to be the real tabasco.

"Colonel Musgrave," he went on, gulping somewhat, "is not a

man who would be likely to overlook the matter. He is a hard man. He will expose me to my vic-ah. My vic-ah is a hard man. I shall be ruined if Colonel Musgrave presents that check, and he leaves for England tonight."

"Mr. Wooster," the girl burst out, "won't you, won't you help us? Oh, do say you will. We must have the money to get back that check from Colonel Musgrave before nine o'clock—he leaves on the nine twenty. I was at my wits' end what to do, when I remembered how kind you had always been and how you had told me at lunch that you had won some money at the casino last night. Mr. Wooster, will you lend it to us, and take these as security?" And before I knew what she was doing, she had dived into her bag, produced a case, and opened it. "My pearls," she said. "I don't know what they are worth—they were a present from my poor father—but I know they must be worth ever so much more than the amount we want."

Dashed embarrassing. Made me feel like a pawnbroker. More than a touch of popping the watch about the whole business.

"No, I say, really," I protested, the haughty old spirit of the Woosters kicking like a mule at the idea. "There's no need for any security, you know, or any rot of that kind. I mean to say, among pals, you know, what? Only too glad the money'll come in useful."

And I fished it out and pushed it across. The brother shook his head.

"Mr. Wooster," he said, "we appreciate your generosity, your beautiful, heartening confidence in us, but we cannot permit this."

"What Sidney means," said the girl, "is that you really don't know anything about us, when you come to think of it. You mustn't risk lending all this money without any security at all to two people, who, after all, are almost strangers."

"Oh, don't say that!"

"I do say it. If I hadn't thought that you would be quite business-like about this, I would never have dared to come to you. If you will just give me a receipt, as a matter of form—"

"Oh, well."

I wrote out the receipt and handed it over feeling more or less of an ass.

"Here you are," I said.

The girl took the piece of paper, shoved it in her bag, grabbed the money and slipped it to brother Sidney, and then, before I knew what was happening, she had darted at me, kissed me, and legged it from the room.

I don't know when I've been so rattled. The whole thing was so dashed sudden and unexpected. Through a sort of mist I could see that Jeeves had appeared from the background and was helping the brother on with his coat; and then the brother came up to me and grasped my hand.

"I can't thank you sufficiently, Mr. Wooster!"

"Oh, right-ho!"

"You have saved my good name. 'Good name in man or woman, dear my lord,' " he said, massaging the fin with some fervor, "'is the immediate jewel of the souls. Who steals my purse steals trash. 'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands. But he that filches from me my good name robs me of that which not enriches him and makes me poor indeed.' I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Goodnight, Mr. Wooster."

"Goodnight, old thing," I said.

"Your brandy and soda, sir," said Jeeves as the door shut.

I blinked at him.

"Oh, there you are!"

"Yes, sir."

"Rather a sad affair, Jeeves."

"Yes, sir."

"Lucky I happened to have all that money handy."

"Well—er—yes, sir."

"You speak as though you didn't think much of it."

"It is not my place to criticize your actions, sir, but I will venture to say that I think you behaved a little rashly."

"What, lending that money?"

"Yes, sir. These fashionable French watering places are notoriously infested by dishonest characters."

This was a bit too thick.

"Now, look here, Jeeves," I said, "I can stand a lot, but when it comes to your casting asp-whatever-the-word-is on the sweetest girl in the world and a bird in Holy Orders—"

"Perhaps I am over-suspicious, sir. But I have seen a great deal of these resorts. When I was in the employment of Lord Frederick Ranelagh, shortly before I entered your service, his lordship was very neatly swindled by a criminal known, I believe, by the sobriquet of Soapy Sid, who scraped acquaintance with us in Monte Carlo with the assistance of a female accomplice. I have never forgotten the circumstance."

"I don't want to butt in on your reminiscences, Jeeves," I said coldly, "but you're talking through your hat. How can there have

been anything fishy about this business? They've left me the pearls, haven't they? Very well, then, think before you speak. You had better be tooling down to the desk now and having these things shoved in the hotel safe." I picked up the case and opened it. "Oh, great Scott!"

The bally thing was empty!

"Oh, my Lord!" I said, staring, "don't tell me there's been dirty work at the crossroads, after all!"

"Precisely, sir. It was in exactly the same manner that Lord Frederick was swindled on the occasion to which I have alluded. While his female accomplice was gratefully embracing his lordship, Soapy Sid substituted a duplicate case for the one containing the pearls, and went off with the jewels, the money, and the receipt. On the strength of the receipt he subsequently demanded from his lordship the return of the pearls, and his lordship, not being able to produce them, was obliged to pay a heavy sum in compensation. It is a simple but effective ruse."

I felt as if the bottom had dropped out of things with a jerk. I mean to say, Aline Hemmingway, you know. What I mean is, if Love hadn't actually awakened in my heart, there's no doubt it was having a jolly good stab at it, and the thing was only a question of days. And all the time—well, I mean, dash it, you know.

"Soapy Sid? Sid! *Sidney!* Brother Sidney! Why, by Jove, Jeeves, do you think that parson was Soapy Sid?"

"Yes, sir."

"But it seems so extraordinary. Why, his collar buttoned at the back—I mean, he would have deceived a bishop. Do you really think he was Soapy Sid?"

"Yes, sir. I recognized him directly he came into the room."

I stared at the blighter.

"You recognized him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then, dash it all," I said, deeply moved, "I think you might have told me."

"I thought it would save disturbance and unpleasantness if I merely abstracted the case from the man's pocket as I assisted him with his coat. Here it is."

He laid another case on the table beside the dud one, and by Jove, you couldn't tell them apart. I opened it, and there were the good old pearls, as merry and bright as dammit, smiling up at me. I gazed feebly at the man. I was feeling a bit overwrought.

"Jeeves," I said, "you're an absolute genius!"

"Yes, sir."

Relief was surging over me in great chunks by now. I'd almost forgotten that a woman had toyed with my heart and thrown it away like a wornout tube of toothpaste and all that sort of thing. What seemed to me the important item was the fact that, thanks to Jeeves, I was not going to be called on to cough up several thousand quid.

"It looks to me as though you had saved the old home. I mean, even a chappie endowed with the immortal rind of dear old Sid is hardly likely to have the nerve to come back and retrieve these little chaps."

"I should imagine not, sir."

"Well, then—oh, I say, you don't think they are just paste or anything like that?"

"No, sir. These are genuine pearls, and extremely valuable."

"Well, then, dash it, I'm on velvet. Absolutely reclining on the good old plush! I may be down a hundred quid, but I'm up a jolly good string of pearls. Am I right or wrong?"

"Hardly that, sir. I think that you will have to restore the pearls."

"What! To Sid? Not while I have my physique!"

"No, sir. To their rightful owner."

"But who is their rightful owner?"

"Mrs. Gregson, sir."

"What! How do you know?"

"It was all over the hotel an hour ago that Mrs. Gregson's pearls had been abstracted. The man Sid traveled from Paris in the same train as Mrs. Gregson, and no doubt marked them down. I was speaking to Mrs. Gregson's maid shortly before you came in, and she informed me that the manager of the hotel is now in Mrs. Gregson's suite."

"And having a devil of a time, what?"

"So I should be disposed to imagine, sir."

The situation was beginning to unfold before me.

"I'll go and give them back to her, eh? It'll put me one up, what?"

"If I might make the suggestion, sir, I think it would strengthen your position if you were to affect to discover the pearls in Mrs. Gregson's suite—say, in a bureau drawer."

"I don't see why."

"I think I am right, sir."

"Well, I stand on you. If you say so. I'll be popping, what?"

"The sooner the better, sir."

Long before I reached Aunt Agatha's lair I could tell that the hunt was up. Divers chappies in hotel uniform and not a few chambermaids of sorts were hanging about in the corridor, and through the panels I could hear a mixed assortment of voices, with Aunt Agatha's topping the lot. I knocked, but no one took any notice, so I trickled in. Among those present I noticed a chambermaid in hysterics, Aunt Agatha with her hair bristling, and a whiskered cove who looked like a bandit, as no doubt he was, being the proprietor of the hotel.

"Oh, hallo," I said. "I got your note, Aunt Agatha."

She waved me away. No welcoming smile for Bertram.

"Oh, don't bother me now," she snapped, looking at me as if I were more or less the last straw.

"Something up?"

"Yes, yes, yes! I've lost my pearls!"

"Pearls? Pearls? Pearls?" I said. "No, really? Dashed annoying. Where did you see them last?"

"What *does* it matter where I saw them last? They have been stolen."

Here Wilfred the Whisker-King, who seemed to have been taking a rest between rounds, stepped into the ring again and began to talk rapidly in French. Cut to the quick, he seemed. The chambermaid whooped in the corner.

"Sure you've looked everywhere?" I asked.

"Of course I've looked everywhere."

"Well, you know, I've often lost a collar stud and—"

"Do try not to be so maddening, Bertie! I have enough to bear without your imbecilities. Oh, be quiet!" she shouted. And such was the magnetism of what Jeeves called her forceful personality that Wilfred subsided as though he had run into a wall. The chambermaid continued to go strong.

"I say," I said, "I think there's something the matter with this girl. Isn't she crying or something?"

"She stole my pearls! I am convinced of it."

This started the whisker-specialist off again, and I left them at it and wandered off on a tour round the room. I slipped the pearls out of the case and decanted them into a drawer. By the time I'd done this and had leisure to observe the free-for-all once more, Aunt Agatha had reached the frozen grande-dame stage and was putting the Last of the Bandits through it in the voice she usually reserves for snubbing waiters in restaurants.

"I tell you, my good man, for the hundredth time, that I have

searched thoroughly—everywhere. Why you should imagine that I have overlooked so elementary—”

“I say,” I said, “don’t want to interrupt you and all that sort of thing, but aren’t these the little chaps?”

I pulled them out of the drawer and held them up.

“These look like pearls, what?”

I don’t know when I’ve had a more juicy moment. It was one of those occasions about which I shall prattle to my grandchildren—if I ever have any, which at the moment of going to press seems more or less of a hundred-to-one shot. Aunt Agatha simply deflated before my eyes. It reminded me of when I once saw some intrepid aeronauts letting the gas out of a balloon.

“Where—where—where?” she gurgled.

“In this drawer. They’d slid under some papers.”

“Oh!” said Aunt Agatha, and there was a bit of silence. I dug out my entire stock of manly courage, breathed a short prayer, and let her have it right in the thorax.

“I must say, Aunt Agatha, dash it,” I said, crisply, “I think you have been a little hasty, what? I mean to say, giving this poor man here so much anxiety and worry and generally biting him in the gizzard. You’ve been very, very unjust to this poor man!”

“Yes, yes,” chipped in the poor man.

“And this unfortunate girl, what about her? Where does she get off? You’ve accused her of pinching the things on absolutely no evidence. I think she would be jolly well advised to bring an action for—for whatever it is, and soak you for substantial damages.”

“*Mais oui, mais oui, c’est trop fort!*” shouted the Bandit Chief, backing me up like a good ‘un. And the chambermaid looked up inquiringly, as if the sun was breaking the clouds.

“I shall recompense her,” said Aunt Agatha, feebly.

“If you take my tip, you jolly well will, and that eftsoons or right speedily. She’s got a cast-iron case, and if I were her I wouldn’t take a cent under twenty quid. But what gives me the pip most is the way you’ve abused this poor man and tried to give his hotel a bad name—”

“Yes, by damn! It’s too bad!” cried the whiskered marvel. “You careless old woman! You give my hotel bad names, would you or wasn’t it? Tomorrow you leave my hotel.”

And more to the same effect, all good, ripe stuff. And presently, having said his say, he withdrew, taking the chambermaid with him, the latter with a crisp tenner clutched in a viselike grip. I suppose she and the bandit split it outside. A French hotel manager

wouldn't be likely to let real money wander away from him without counting himself in on the division.

I turned to Aunt Agatha, whose demeanor was now rather like that of one who, picking daisies on the railway, has just caught the down express in the small of the back.

"There was something you wished to speak to me about?" I said.

"No, no. Go away, go away."

"You said in your note—"

"Yes, yes, never mind. Please go away, Bertie. I wish to be alone."

"Oh, right-ho!" I said. "Right-ho! right-ho!" And back to the good old suite.

"Ten o'clock, a clear night, and all's well, Jeeves," I said, breezing in.

"I am gratified to hear it, sir."

"If twenty quid would be any use to you, Jeeves—?"

"I am much obliged, sir."

There was a pause. And then—well, it was a wrench, but I did it. I unstripped the cummerbund and handed it over.

"Do you wish me to press this, sir?"

I gave the thing one last longing look. It had been very dear to me.

"No," I said, "take it away; give it to the deserving poor. I shall never wear it again."

"Thank you very much, sir," said Jeeves.

SOLUTION TO THE JUNE "UNSOLVED":

Virgil Earp shot Billy Claiborne.

James Earp was shot by Frank McLowry.

Doc Holliday shot Billy Clanton.

Morgan Earp was shot by Ike Clanton.

Wyatt Earp shot Tom McLowry.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Illustration by Sheila Smith

What's so funny about murder?

Murder isn't funny, of course. Not in real life. It's the ultimate theft of another human being's rights. Yet many perpetrators of crime fiction employ humor to great effect. At a fan convention last year, a panel of several mystery authors addressed the topic. Joan Hess admitted that she doesn't know any other way to write. Dorothy Cannell confided that humor is her own instinctive response to tension or tragedy, so its introduction into her murder mysteries is natural. Certainly, different writers use humor in vastly different ways. For some it's gentle wit, for others, it's sharp-tongued satire, or wildly wicked black comedy. Readers, choose your own poison . . . or laughing gas, perhaps?

The transatlantic trip for British humor isn't always smooth, but Robert Barnard's deliciously satirical novels usually tickle America's funnybone. **Death by Sheer Torture** (Dell, \$3.50) introduced Scotland Yard detective Perry Trethowan, who has orders to investigate the very embarrassing death of his estranged father. This became the reader's introduction to Perry's wacky family. To know the Trethowans is to understand exactly why our man Perry opted for "black sheep" status and ran off to become a cop.

Dorothy Cannell's **Thin Woman** (Penguin, \$4.50) is just what wise-cracking Ellie Haskell contentedly isn't—not, that is, until her uncle's will stipulates that her inheritance be handed out only if she drops the pounds. Now the question is: can she survive long

enough to enjoy the fruits (so to speak) of her dieting, when someone else seems to think that a violent death might instead be her just desserts (ahem). No one does one-liners better than Ellie.

A Nice Class of Corpse (Dell, \$3.95) is just what one can expect of an upper-crust retirement hotel on the British coast. It's also the debut of Simon Brett's lively widow, Mrs. Melita Pargeter. She's not your standard resident, though. She's been happily married for many years to a man Scotland Yard would have loved to nab in the act.

C.H.B. Kitchin's **Death of My Aunt** (Carroll & Graf, \$3.95) is gentle British humor. Here's an old fashioned mystery with elements fans love, including a mild-mannered hero with an unassuming manner and an unerring nose for murder. Another delightfully droll protagonist is to be found in Sarah Caudwell's three books. Look for **The Sirens Sang of Murder** (Dell, \$3.95) wherein Hilary must once again sort out the fatal *affaires du coeur* of young London legal friends. (And you, gentle reader, can decide whether you believe Hilary to be male or female. Hilary's creator is keeping mum. Does that give you an inkling of the kind of fun author Caudwell has with language in her mysteries?)

William Marshall's Yellowthread Street novels, with books like **Frogmouth** (Mysterious Press, \$3.50) are a police procedural series set in Hong Kong. If that doesn't sound particularly amusing, that's because the average imagination will always pale beside Marshall's own. The locale isn't the most exotic element in these wild, scary, and often shockingly hilarious tales. Look for a liberal lacing of black humor.

Carl Hiaasen's novels, too, are zany and gory at the same time. Take **Double Whammy** (Warner, \$4.95) a zany Florida caper with trailer parks, bass-fishing contests, and a protagonist some might not inaccurately describe as a "loose cannon." The result is black comedy à la crime.

Are you looking for frothier fun? Here are a few suggestions. Orania Papazoglou's **Sweet, Savage Death** (Penguin, \$3.50) introduced romance-writer Pay McKenna, a sassy and statuesque redhead who writes literature for her art and bodice-rippers for the rent—and who doesn't appreciate her writer friends getting killed in anything other than their reviews. In **Die for Love** (Tor, \$3.95), Elizabeth Peters brings a sarcastic librarian from Nebraska to New York City for a convention she can write off on her taxes. Jacqueline Kirby, in a gathering of sweet-tempered historical romance writers, is really the cat among the pigeons, and I loved every minute. In **Letter of the Law** (Dell, \$3.95), Carole Berry intro-

duced a tap-dancing office manager named Bonnie Indermill, a sassy Manhattan lady who seems doomed to search for the perfect job (one in which no one gets murdered). Three books, and no luck yet for Bonnie, which is great luck for readers.

George Baxt gives us the quip-laden lady of letters in her very own case of murder among friends in **The Dorothy Parker Murder Case** (IPL, \$8.95). No one but Baxt would have the *chutzpah* to toy with Parker's reputation, but I'll bet Dot would have loved it. Lawrence Block's **Burglar in the Closet** (Pocket Books, \$3.50) features the bungling Bernie Rhodenbarr, an ingratiating guy who is trying to survive by breezing along on the wrong side of the law—with disastrous consequences. **Unorthodox Practices** (Pocket Books, \$3.50) by Marissa Piesman stars a smart and sassy lady lawyer from Brooklyn, and Susan Wolfe gets lots of laughs out of the legal profession with her **The Last Billable Hour** (Ivy, \$3.95). Or look for the fun in publishing in **The Last Page** by Bob Fenster (Perseverance Press, \$8.95), which has a rejected author's fantasy for a plot. Someone is killing New York mystery editors, leaving a note pinned to their chests: "We regret to inform you that your life does not meet our needs at this time. . . ." Our heroine—an editor—suddenly begins to take the "slush pile" quite seriously, indeed. Or try Dick Lochte's **Sleeping Dog** (Warner, \$3.95), which stars a sidesplitting pair of Hollywood sleuths: a rundown L.A. private eye and his precocious "Valley Girl" partner. This is a clever twist to the Nick-and-Nora style bantering.

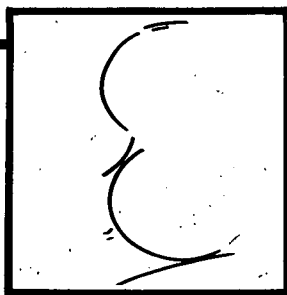
There's Joyce Christmas's **A Fete Worse Than Death** (Fawcett, \$3.95) with Lady Margaret Priam and her titled young sidekick in a witty whodunit peopled with the scions of Manhattan's society. All the titles in the series are great fun, as are Carolyn G. Hart's books with mystery bookstore owner Annie Laurence. Try **Honeymoon with Murder** (Bantam, \$3.95). Sharyn McCrumb's **Sick of Shadows** (Ballantine, \$3.95) finds the young heroine unhappily in the bosom of her family to bear witness to the impending wedding of her least favorite cousin. This is Southern Gothic with a wicked touch.

Dorothy Gilman is well known for her Mrs. Pollifax series, but have you ever read **A Nun in the Closet** (Fawcett, \$4.95)? Here's a wacky tale of two nuns, an old house, a gardening-happy group of hippies, and a corpse that wouldn't die. The result is a murder, Marx Brothers style.

Surely some of these will tickle your fancy. Proceed with caution, however. We wouldn't want you to die laughing.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



Back in the seventies, Ford Motor Company executives saw their careers flash before their eyes after a manufacturing flaw caused some of their much touted Pinto models to explode in flames when rear-ended.

The press nicknamed the automobile the "Ford flambé," and lawsuits brought by victims and their families kept the automaker parked in court for years. In the eyes of many, the tarnish on Ford's reputation took even longer to remove.

In **Class Action**, a legal barnburner directed by Michael Apted, the fictitious Argo Motors finds itself in a similar situation with its 1985 Meridian station wagon—a family car.

The action is set in a San Francisco courtroom where Jeddiah Tucker Ward (Gene Hackman), a boisterous, left-wing activist lawyer, repre-

sents a group of horribly scarred accident victims. Margaret Ward (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio), a pretty, young counsel on a beeline toward partnership in her patrician law firm, represents the auto company. The last name is no coincidence—she's Jed Ward's daughter. The presiding judge puts it succinctly when he comments, "I'm glad I'm not going to be at your house for the holidays." There's no love lost here.

There is, however, an abundance of intrigue. When Maggie discovers the existence of a report that may prove her father's case, it goes missing. She doesn't know whom to trust at her firm, including her prim and proper boyfriend Michael, who is also her legal superior at work. She's not even sure which side she's on after some time on the case.

The audience is also witness to legal maneuvering that would

make the Nixon White House, in its Watergate heyday, proud. Ironically, Fred Thompson—who was the minority counsel to the Senate Watergate Committee—plays a corporate bureaucrat integrally involved in a criminal coverup.

The court case runs parallel to the story of the father and daughter's longstanding adversarial relationship. While the younger Ward was growing up, the senior Ward spent quite a bit of time out of the house, defending his causes. Some of these "causes," we discover, were women other than Mrs. Ward. While her mother was able to forgive him and strengthen the marriage, Maggie maintains her hatred of what he did and her loathing of him. As a result she rejects his liberal advocacy for the Persian carpet-lined halls of corporate law. When her mother, who sides politically with her husband, urges her to drop the case, Maggie responds, "I won't drop this case. Somebody has to beat him. You didn't."

In a confrontation after Maggie tells her father she'll be representing Argo Motors—it's her law firm's largest client—her self-righteous dad tells her, "They're using you. They pop out baby lawyers like you like a shark grows teeth. When it comes to crunch time, they'll send in the big boys." An even

more infuriated Maggie is determined to put her father in his place once and for all.

Gene Hackman and Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio are class acts in *Class Action*. The veteran Hackman is larger than life, both physically and emotionally. He bellows, he makes sarcastic quips, he breaks down, he's apologetic. He portrays an outstanding character, with fire. To their credit, screenwriters Carolyn Shelby, Christopher Ames, and Samantha Shad avoid a pitfall that kills many movies with a political bent. Jed Ward is a hardened leftist, but he is far from perfect. We get to see this man, warts and all. Instead of a boring political diatribe against big corporations, we get a human drama, complete with compelling courtroom action.

Mastrantonio shows she is a young acting force to be reckoned with. She and Hackman work together as if they really could be a battling daughter and father. She presents a cold, hard exterior but somehow lets a little light shine through, making her likeable.

The supporting cast, Joanna Merlin as Maggie's mother, Colin Friels as Maggie's unlikeable boyfriend, Donald Moffat as the win-at-all-cost head of her law firm, and Larry Fishburne as Jed Ward's caring fellow lawyer, is first-rate.

THE STORY THAT WON



The February Mysterious Photo-Jones of Ashern, Manitoba, to Pat Popelier of East Moline, Alliance, Ohio; Gloria Rosenthal James A. Knoop of Sterling McPherson of Fort McMurray, of Silver Spring, Maryland; Lorraine Stewart of Derry, New Hampshire; Adrian Ludens of Rapid City, South Dakota; Thomas M. Martin of Sarasota, Florida; and Mary-Louise W. Pick of Cincinnati, Ohio.

graph contest was won by Debbie Canada. Honorable mentions go Illinois; Bette Lou George of of Valley Stream, New York; Heights, Michigan; Michael C. Alberta, Canada; Donald Smyth

Photo by Brian N. Cox

ROOKIES—WHO NEEDS THEM? by Debbie Jones

The two police cars screeched to a halt. The four officers jumped out.

"Where did they go?" asked veteran Officer O'Mallory.

"They couldn't have just disappeared," said Lieutenant Nash.

"Which way do we go?" asked Captain Pierce.

Quiet until now, Rookie Jones spoke.

"It's quite obvious."

"What?" all three exclaimed in unison.

"What are you talking about, Jones?" shouted Lieutenant Nash.

"Well," replied Jones, "we know each of the seven murders took place during the time the circus was in town. We also know that the murderer is stalking his eighth victim. The victim is working with us; therefore he knows we are right behind them, so he left us that clue."

"Clue, what clue?" Honestly, thought Officer O'Mallory, these rookies are always finding clues that aren't there.

"It's that signpost," said Jones. "He put the arrow pointing to the left and tied the wire way up high on the top."

When this was met with silence, Jones continued, "The suspects . . . don't you remember?"

I'll remember you, thought O'Mallory, when I have my new partner, and he won't be a rookie.

"One of the suspects was named Gauche. That's French for 'left.' Don't you see? The arrow is pointing left, the wire is on top, and Gauche was the—"

"High wire act," all three cried at once.

Saints an' begorrah, I think I'll keep him, thought O'Mallory.

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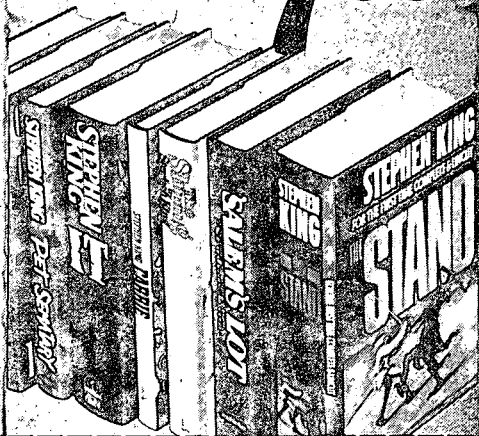
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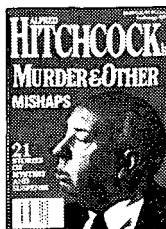
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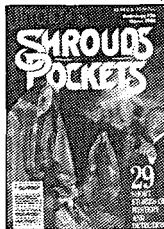


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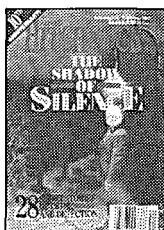
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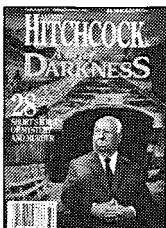
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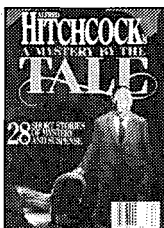


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